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All Saints Episcopal Church

The Book of Acts is often referred to as the story of the *Gentile* mission. Most of its 28 chapters tell the story of how "The Way" of Jesus expanded from its origins in and around Jerusalem to gain followers all around the Mediterranean. This was no easy feat, either. Integrating the strict Jewish culture and the many and varied non-Jewish cultures required excruciating growing pains.

Today's reading is only the end of one of the stories about this huge shift, and it is important to know what precedes it in order to understand what we (Noah) read a few minutes ago.

So here is a quick update:

Cornelius, a spiritual but not religious *Gentile* of some importance in the Roman legion and a member of the Italian Cohort living in Caesarea, had a vision. It was a particularly clear vision: to send for the apostle Peter, who was staying in the town of Joppa some 30 miles away.

Peter, a devout and faithful Jew and an ardent follower of Jesus Christ, had a vision, too, only his vision was not clear at all. Peter was in Joppa, staying at a friend's house. He was hungry, and while he was waiting for food to be prepared, he went up onto the roof to pray, and fell into a trance. In this trance, he saw the heavens open and something like a large sheet floating down. In this sheet were all sorts of animals - 4-legged animals and reptiles and birds of all kinds - foods that good Jews were not allowed to even touch, much less eat.

A voice told Peter to get up, kill and eat. Peter's reply was, "By no means, Lord! You know I can't eat what is profane and unclean!" The voice called back, "What God has made, you must not call profane."

This happened three times, and then the sheet disappeared into heaven. Perhaps we, like Peter, are "greatly perplexed" at how God can simply declare instantly something clean that has always been impure. But before Peter could figure out what this bizarre vision was about, Cornelius' men were knocking at the door to take Peter to Caesarea.

The Holy Spirit told Peter to go with them, so he agreed to do so. But before they set out, Peter offered the travelers lodging for the night. It would be safe to assume that this included the offer of a meal as well, which might have been difficult for Peter before his vision, because it was also not allowed for Jews to associate with or visit a *Gentile*. But this act of hospitality to *Gentiles*, and others, began to blur the lines of distinction between 'insiders' and outsiders.'

Once Peter arrived at Cornelius' house, he could tell that Cornelius was having a genuine experience of God. And there he put the pieces together. He said, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God. He had come to realize that everyone is acceptable to God. This openness transcended the traditional Jewish boundaries that were keeping some folks on the outside of the Christ-followers.

A word here about the people Luke calls "circumcised believers." Up until now the believers had all been Jews, who had been expecting the Messiah, so, logically, they had said that if one wanted to be a follower of Jesus, one had to be a Jew first. And to be a Jew meant you had to be circumcised. So the Jews said to non-Jews that everyone was welcome, as long as you first became a Jew by being circumcised, then you got baptized, and then you got the Holy Spirit.

But now, at Cornelius' house, God said, "That's nice and all. But it's oh so wrong! Let's just skip the first parts and go directly to the bestowing of the Holy Spirit, shall we?" And the Holy Spirit blew through the room and short-circuited the usual order of things...

and only now do we arrive at today's reading...

and Peter and the circumcised believers who had come with him were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out EVEN on the *Gentiles*. They had no clue up until now what God was doing or what God was capable of. Instead of being open to the infinite possibilities of God, they were close-minded, thinking that the only way to God was a way that looked like the way they had come to God.

Of course, this is the classic struggle in the New Testament Church between Jewish and *Gentile* Christianity, but, obviously, it is also the classic struggle of the Church today. Most of us, at least during some time in our lives, have used the 'We've always done it that way' mantra as a reason why something shouldn't change

in the church. Or we've said we want to return to the 'good old days' of church, when people did such and such the RIGHT way, and children did THIS, and clergy didn't do THAT! And that's not so bad - as long as it doesn't become the only thing people say.

But if we take that so far that we exclude others because they don't do things the same way we do things, or they don't think the way we think, or they don't look the way we look, or talk the way we talk, or live the way we live, or love the way we love, then we have failed them and we have failed God. In case we aren't clear on the issue of who belongs, Jesus states the answer so plainly that there are no excuses behind which to hide: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. "

There are no exceptions, no footnotes, no qualifiers.

Women can preach. Pagans do have souls. Slaves are really people.

Native Americans are not savages. LGBT persons do not choose a lifestyle.

Homeless persons and immigrants and poor people and Muslims are REALLY people.

God created them all in their uniqueness.

And God astounds us and bestows the Holy Spirit upon whomever God chooses, regardless of our rules and our prejudices.

You may have read this week about two dads who attend the Episcopal Cathedral in Orlando, FL and had asked that their adopted baby, Jack, be baptized. It was approved and scheduled by the Dean, but at the last minute, was cancelled because of a 'conflict.' Someone - unnamed - had objected to the baptism because the dads were, well, 2 dads. Fingers were pointed. People on social media were outraged when what happened was shared online. The Dean and the Bishop seemed to throw each other under the bus in their efforts to deny responsibility for this travesty.

And all week, Peter's question kept presenting itself, "Who can withhold the water for baptism for these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

And the question becomes, "From whom are we withholding the waters of baptism?"

Over the past month and a half, I have been privileged to participate on the committee that is planning the service of Ordination and Consecration for our Bishop-Elect, Russell Kendrick. Russell and his wife, Robin, have been at several of the meetings and it has been a pleasure to begin to get to know both of them. Please believe me when I say we are blessed to have such a fine, caring man to lead us for this next season.

Friday, the committee met to fine-tune details about the service, like, are we going to say, 'The Word of the Lord' or 'Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people'? Are we going to sing this hymn or that hymn? Which Eucharistic Prayer will we use and how many acolytes will we have? When we got to the Invitation to Communion, I asked Russell if he wanted the service booklet to say 'All people are invited to receive' or 'All baptized people are invited to receive.'

The difference in those two statements is a matter of inclusion or exclusion to Jim and me, and you know that we say 'all people.'

Russell answered with the Invitation that he says at every Eucharist - one that comes from the Iona Community in Scotland. I think if we can remember this, we will find that we are not withholding the waters of baptism from anyone:

This is the table, not of the Church, but of the Lord. It is made ready for those who love God and for those who want to love God more.

So, come, you who have much faith and you who have doubts. Come if you have been here often, and come if you have not been here long. Come if you have followed, and come if you have stumbled. Come, because it is the Lord who invites you.

It is Christ's will that those who seek him should meet him here.