

Inclusive God

2020-09-06 Sermon

By Pastor Sharon Tidd

Do you remember Peter's first sermon? It's recorded in Acts 2, having been delivered right after the Spirit of God was poured out powerfully on the church. In that sermon to the crowd that had witnessed the early disciples speaking in many different languages, Peter quoted the prophet Joel who much earlier had declared, "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams."

Well, it was two visions that led to the proclamation of the Gospel to a house full of Gentiles in Acts 10; a proclamation that led to the Spirit's being poured out on those Gentiles in the same way He had been poured out on the Jewish disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2). The Gentiles who heard the Good News through Peter, believed in Jesus Christ for their salvation, and God welcomed them into the church! Thank God for the vision that Cornelius received and acted upon. Thank God for the vision Peter received and acted upon. The mission trajectory of the Church changed dramatically as a result of those two visions and

the faithful obedience of two men who were fully committed to following the leading of God.

Today, we want to look at Acts 11:1-18. I invite you to take time now to read it. In this passage Peter's actions in Caesarea (Acts 10) are questioned by the church in Jerusalem. Now, I don't know about you, but I personally struggle when people question my actions ... both as a Christ-follower and as a leader in the church, especially when those actions have come as a direct response to God's leading. If my actions and attitudes don't reflect God's goodness and love, then sure, I need to be admonished and corrected like anybody else. But often, when I am confident that I am doing the right thing, people question it and that hurts. Can anyone relate?

Well that was where Peter found himself on this day! He had acted in perfect obedience to the leading of the Spirit of God. He had travelled from Joppa to Caesarea and entered the house of Cornelius and proclaimed the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ to the Gentiles that had gathered there. Recognizing their faith and the immediate movement of the Spirit in their lives, he had encouraged them to be baptized and had welcomed them into the church. But when word of these actions reached the "circumcised believers" in Judea/Jerusalem they were immediately questioned (vs 1-2). (FYI, "circumcised

believers” means Jews and Gentiles who had fully adopted the legal requirements of the Jewish faith, who were now believers in Jesus Christ.)

Interestingly, the charge against Peter wasn’t that he had preached the Word of God. No, it was that he had entered the house of a Gentile and ate with him and his friends who were “uncircumcised men” (vs. 3). This was against Jewish law (10:28), so the criticism wouldn’t have come as a surprise to Peter! But God had made it clear to Peter that those old laws were no longer to apply. Who was he to call “unclean” what God had made clean?

How did Peter react to their criticism? Was he upset that they questioned his actions? It doesn’t appear so. Acts 11:4 tells us “Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened.” Peter knew his attitudes and actions represented a significant paradigm shift. He understood why they were confused and were questioning the decisions he had made. (After all, he’d done the same when God shared His vision with him. Acts 10:14) He recognized that they needed an explanation. And so he shared everything! He shared the vision that he had received from the Spirit, even highlighting how God had shared it *three* times to ensure that thick-headed Peter did not question it! He shared how Cornelius, directed by the Spirit of God, had sent men to find him and bring him to Caesarea. He emphasized that the Lord had told Cornelius that Peter “would

bring a message through which you (Cornelius) and all your household will be saved" (11:14). Then Peter shared how Cornelius and those he had gathered in his house that day were baptized by the Spirit in the very same way that the Spirit had come upon the disciples in Jerusalem at Pentecost. And Peter concluded this explanation of his extraordinary actions with this powerful statement, "If God gave them the same gift as He gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God? (vs 17)"

Who was I to think I could oppose God? God was doing something new and no man-made rules was going to stop Him. He was opening up the floodgates of His love and acceptance to all. This had always been His plan. This had always been His way. But over time, the Jewish people had forgotten that they were chosen and blessed in order to bless all people. Jesus' earliest disciples were men and women who had been deeply influenced by the Jewish beliefs and practices of their day. The Jews' special relationship with God had been twisted and distorted by their religious leaders in such a way that they believed they alone were to be the recipients of His grace and mercy and unfailing love. The early Church was, to this point, comprised mostly of men and women who had held to these beliefs for their entire lives. And that belief journeyed with them into their relationship with Jesus and His Church. But now God was taking the

steps necessary to shatter that false belief and replace it with His true message of love and acceptance for ALL.

The evidence of this message of inclusiveness was there in Christ's ministry. Though He focused His teaching and healing ministries on Jews, Gentiles also received these blessings from Him. Some received them as part of the crowds that followed Him and listened to His teachings. Others sought Him out specifically, and were touched directly by His love and compassion. Jesus' ministry was inclusive! As He prayed and wept over Jerusalem, His prayers included the Gentiles who lived there! But until this moment, His Church's ministry had been exclusive. The focus of their Gospel-sharing was on Jews and Gentiles who had converted to Judaism (circumcision and all!). It was time for that to change!

Peter received that message, loud and clear, from God. The vision given to him on the roof in Joppa was the start of a complete re-shaping of his thoughts, his attitudes and his actions. The positive reception of the Gospel message by Cornelius' household in Caesarea, and their immediate baptism by Spirit fire, was the final proof! The Gospel of Jesus Christ was for all people ... every nation, every tribe, every tongue ... without exception! No one was to be excluded. The Gospel was/is fully inclusive! The sacrificial love of God is offered freely to every

man, woman and child. Peter now knew this deep within his soul. And, though it meant setting traditions and deep-rooted beliefs aside, he was not going to oppose or stand in the way of His God!

Thankfully, the Church received Peter's explanation with gladness. Acts 11:18 says, "When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life!'" Yes, even the Gentiles! Race doesn't matter. Former belief systems don't matter. Skin colour doesn't matter. What matters is that all have been made in the image of God and, as such, are worthy recipients of God's redeeming love. What matters is the willingness of the individual to receive the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. What matters is the individual's surrender to the Spirit of God. All are sinners who need a Saviour. Because of Jesus, all are able to be saved by grace!

The Church, on that day, came to understand that its responsibility was to ensure that this message was made known to all people. And like the Gentiles in Caesarea, anyone who heard the Word, and believed and sincerely repented before God would be baptized by the Holy Spirit and granted life eternal in Jesus' Name! Do we understand this to be our primary responsibility today? Are we ready and willing to share the Good News with all?

As I reflected on this passage today, three primary lessons came to me from this day in the life of the apostle Peter:

1. We must each faithfully follow the leading of God.

God is continually working to transform our thinking and our doing, to bring us in line with His ways. Are we, like Peter, open to receiving visions that help us properly understand His ways? Are we eager to see what He is doing in this world? And are we ready to join Him in that? Are we prepared to let go of old traditions and deep-seated beliefs so that we do not stand in His way? Are we letting the Spirit reveal the prejudices and biases that are standing in the way of our full obedience to God's will today?

2. We have to be prepared to face opposition, even from within the Church.

Peter was the prominent leader in the Church at this time in its history. Still, his actions were questioned. He accepted that. He didn't get defensive. He wasn't hurt or bothered by it. He knew that actions in Caesarea were counter-cultural to all that his fellow Christians had understood and believed about God and His ways with humanity. In light of this, an explanation was needed. And so he graciously explained fully and precisely how God had led him to take the steps he had taken. He made it clear that he had followed God, rather than men, as he

was compelled to do as an apostle of Jesus Christ! Like him, we may find ourselves having to explain ourselves as we branch out in faith, following God's leading in our lives. Like Peter, we need to take the time to graciously explain what God has asked of us and the path that we have taken in obedience to His call.

3. We each must choose inclusiveness!

At that time, it was racial biases and prejudices that stood in the way of the Church being fully inclusive. Today, sadly, that remains a challenge for the church. But our biases and prejudices don't stop there. What are the other prejudices/biases that keep you and I from being fully inclusive? This is a deeply personal question, but one that today's passage calls us to. A couple specific questions came to me as I reflected on the Church today in western culture:

- Are we welcoming of those who battle serious mental health issues (depression, severe anxiety, psychological disorders) or are there biases and fears that hinder us? This is a huge issue within our immediate culture. How are we, as a church, responding?
- As a denomination that takes pride in its ministry to the poor and the homeless, do we seek to reflect that openness in our congregational ministries? Would a homeless person, unbathed and poorly dressed, find a welcome or would we be suspicious of them?

The Word of God makes it clear that the Good News of Jesus Christ is for the whosoever. We say it and sing it, but do we mean it? I was drawn to this Gowans and Larson song as I reflected on Acts 11. It challenged me to understand anew that the Church is to be a reflection of heaven on earth! In closing, I invite you to meditate on its words and allow the Spirit to use them to transform your thoughts, your attitudes and your actions.

They shall come from the east, they shall come from the west, and sit down in the Kingdom of God.

Both the rich and the poor, the despised, the distressed, and sit down in the Kingdom of God.

And none shall ask what they have been, provided that their robes are clean.

They shall come from the east, they shall come from the west, and sit down in the Kingdom of God.

They shall come from the east, they shall come from the west, and sit down in the Kingdom of God.

To be met by their Father and welcomed and blessed, and sit down in the Kingdom of God.

The black, the white, the dark, the fair, your colour does not matter there.

They shall come from the east, they shall come from the west, and sit down in the Kingdom of God.

They shall come from the east, they shall come from the west, and sit down in the Kingdom of God.

Out of great tribulation to triumph and rest, they'll sit down in the Kingdom of God.

From every tribe and every race, all men as brothers shall embrace.

They shall come from the east, they shall come from the west, and sit down in the Kingdom of God.