

Jesus is for Everyone —Rev. Denise Stone

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BIG FLATS NY, 6-30-19

The last several weeks we have been looking at the work of the Holy Spirit as seen in the book of Acts. We have seen how the Holy Spirit started with a small group of disciples and followers of Jesus and has slowly expanded the circle, the reach of the “church.”

We started at Pentecost with the disciples in Jerusalem receiving the gift of speaking in other languages for the people gathered for the Festival at Pentecost. We went from a small group to a larger group of Jewish individuals.

Then we saw that the disciples and the early church prayed for boldness from the Spirit to continue sharing the message of Jesus.

And last week we saw how the Spirit motivated Phillip to talk to the Ethiopian official, a man very unlike himself, about the Good News of Jesus - and how important it is to listen to the Spirit.

The circle of believers continues to get bigger as we follow the work of the Holy Spirit within the early church. This week the circle grows even larger.

I deliberately divided up the passage for today because it is rather lengthy. However, the whole of the text is important for us to hear and to understand.

To give you a little context, Jewish people of the 1st Century did not associate with Gentiles any more than was absolutely necessary. Even in worship, the temple was set up for the gentiles to worship away from the Jewish men in the court of the gentiles (so were women and children, but that is for another sermon).

Jewish people, then as now, observe ritual laws with regard to food – distinguishing some foods as clean and some as unclean. We see it today with Kosher foods and with Jewish people having a Kosher kitchen. For the 1st Century it would also be reasonable to understand the Jewish people seeing Gentiles as unclean- or common to use the text's phrasing.

So we begin the story with Cornelius a Gentile, a Centurion. We are also told that he is a devout man, committed to God and to sharing what he has.

It is about 3 in the afternoon and Cornelius receives a vision from an Angel of God. He is to send men to Joppa to find Simon Peter and bring him back to his home. Cornelius does as instructed and sends two servants and a soldier to Joppa to find Simon Peter.

We switch gears the next day to Peter. Around noon Peter goes to the rooftop to pray. As with most of us around noon, Peter got hungry. While someone was fixing him a meal, Scripture says he fell into a trance.

While in this trance, Peter had three visions. These visions all serve to explain to Peter that anything that God declares to be clean is clean and is not forbidden. That is a brand new idea for Peter. Verse 17 goes so far as to tell us that Peter was inwardly perplexed.

And while Peter was still on the rooftop, processing this new idea, the men that Cornelius sent, arrived at the house. As the men are asking if Simon Peter was there, the Spirit told Peter that three men are looking for him and that he is to go down and accompany them without hesitation.

First Peter invited them in to be his guests and then the next day he went with them to Cornelius's town. Verses 25 and 26 tell us something that I love, "When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshipped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, 'Stand up; I too am a man.'"ⁱ

Peter's statement is evidence that he understood the lesson of his visions, which was that no person is common or unclean – in other words, is no distinction

between Jew and Gentile. Peter spends the remainder of chapter 10 leading Cornelius and his household to become believers in Jesus Christ.

Then we get to Chapter 11. We are told that the “apostles and the brothers throughout Judea”ⁱ – i.e. the Jewish Christians – heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God.

When Peter returned to Jerusalem, Luke tells us that the “Circumcision Party,” now these were the Christian Jews who believed that in order to be a Christian you also had to be or become a Jew, they criticized Peter for eating with and staying with Gentiles. This sounds a bit like when the Pharisees rebuked Jesus for eating with Sinners.

Peter uses this opportunity to teach the Jewish Christians what he had learned from the Spirit of God through the Visions he had. Peter made certain to emphasize what he learned – that What God has made clean, do not call unclean or common. Peter then went on to explain to them that as he preached to Cornelius and the others, the Holy Spirit fell on them. Peter says that the Holy Spirit fell on them “just as on us at the beginning” – referring to Pentecost.

Chapter 11, Verses 17-18 cap off this story, “¹⁷ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when

we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?”¹⁸ When they heard this, they were silenced.

Then they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”ⁱ

When they heard this, they were silenced. They were silenced.

So often when we are in a debate, we want so desperately to be right that we stop really listening. We are busy getting ready to defend our position. That is not what happened in Acts Chapter 11. Even the people being critical of Peter, have their minds opened to the truth.

And *then* they praised God, recognizing that Jesus is for everyone – even the Gentiles.

This is the same message that we need to learn and learn and learn again. Throughout Christian history we have forgotten that God is for everyone even those not like us. God is for everyone, even those who believe and live differently than us. God is for everyone.

Paul tells us in Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”ⁱ Paul is talking to the Church at Galatia, but the truth of this verse is not church or country specific. When we proclaim that Jesus came to live and to die and to be resurrected for our salvation, this message is for everyone. Just as we saw last week in the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch, Jesus is for everyone - regardless of race or ethnicity, regardless of sexual identity or political affiliation. Jesus is for everyone – period.

I have no doubts that the Spirit of God is speaking to us to be like Philip last week’s text and Peter in this week’s – to reach outside these walls and to share the Good News of Jesus.

Two weeks ago I asked for people to write down goals or ministry ideas that they have for this Church. Last week I mentioned that of the 27 separate suggestions, 16 of them had to do with outreach to our community. This is a clear indicator that we are a congregation willing to reach beyond our own walls and beyond our comfort levels.

I want you to leave here today knowing and embracing that Jesus is for everyone. It is our responsibility to share that good news with those we encounter – regardless of what they look like, what

they believe or how they live. May we strive to reach outside these walls and to share the Good News of Jesus.

ⁱ [English Standard Version \(ESV\)](#)

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