

Cornelius and the Gentile Mission

A sermon preached at Second Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the sixth Sunday of Easter, May 4, 1997.
Scripture Lessons: Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The Story of Peter & Cornelius... prejudice broken down & destroyed

I was raised in a deeply prejudiced community. I grew up in an all white working class neighborhood in a suburb of Wilmington, Delaware. Our neighbors worked in construction, in factories, or drove trucks and heavy machinery. Most of our neighbors were members of labor unions: The Teamsters, the Ladies Garment Workers Union, Roofers, Electricians, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Fireman and Engineers. And we were all Democrats.

In this prejudiced class-conscious environment I was taught that Republicans are for the rich and Democrats for the poor. Our neighbors prided themselves on being hard workers and complained that the rich were lazy. The rich, I learned from prejudiced teachers, got all kinds of government tax breaks unavailable to the working class. I heard stories that proved if you're wealthy you can break the law and get away with it. Furthermore, rich people were supposed to be more sexually immoral. Finally I was taught that most wealthy people don't feel any need of Jesus Christ. I was raised in a community deeply rooted in prejudice.

I got a shocking surprise when I went to my first parish as an assistant minister in Portsmouth, Ohio. One of the wealthiest families in town befriended me. They invited me to dinner. They took me to plays and concerts. They treated me like their son. But I harbored feelings of deep prejudice against them because

they owned a factory where there was no union and they were staunch Republicans. I was surprised that they didn't have horns and a tail. All my prejudices came under attack as I got to know them.

I discovered they were deeply devout Christians. They were outspoken advocates of civil rights in a racially divided town. They paid their factory workers better wages and benefits than the union shops. Furthermore, whenever there was work to do in the community or in the church, they were the first to roll up their sleeves to paint walls or get down on their hands and knees to scrub floors. All my deeply held prejudices were undermined.

My guess is that you can think of groups of people you were taught were immoral, or sacriligious, or lazy, or unclean, or sinful -- maybe they were Roman Catholics or Democrats, or Mexicans or African Americans or White people! ^{or poor people} Many of us grew up disliking, perhaps even hating whole groups of people. "Stay away from those kinds of people" our parents would say. Then you got to know someone from within that villified group and you found your stereotypes shattered.

That's what happened to Simon Peter. Peter was raised in a home deeply rooted in prejudice against gentiles. He was a Jew. His neighbors were Jews. He married a nice Jewish girl. He strictly followed the Jewish dietary laws: no pork, no shrimp, only kosher food for him. Every morning Peter prayed, "I thank you Lord, that I'm not a Gentile."

Peter made every attempt to avoid gentiles. The very thought of sitting at the same table with a gentile filled him

with a sense of loathing. Gentiles were unclean. They had a distinctively unpleasant odor. They were immoral. ^{sexually perverse} They were idolaters. They were hostile toward God. Even Jesus referred to gentiles as dogs and warned his disciples not to pray like gentiles who pile up empty phrases and think they'll be heard because of their many words.

Today, Christians sometimes ask, "Will the Jews be saved, even when they don't believe in Jesus?" But the big question for the earliest Jewish Christians was, "Will the gentiles be saved?" Can God, will God save idolatrous, God hating, sexually perverse, gentile dogs?

Some Christians in the early church said, "NO! Gentiles can't be saved, not unless they change. Not unless they adopt Jewish customs. Not unless they keep the Old Testament ceremonies and laws." Other Christians argued, "Yes, Gentiles can be saved. All they have to do is repent and trust in Jesus." The debate in the early church was every bit as controversial as any debate in the church today. Chapters 10 and 11 of the book of Acts present a compelling argument for answering, "Yes! God can and will and does save gentiles."

Our first scripture lesson contains just a fragment of the story. So let's listen to the story from where it begins in chapter 10. Peter received a vision from the Lord directing him to go to the home of a gentile - a Roman soldier named Cornelius living in Caesarea. ^{He} ~~Peter~~ reluctantly obeyed and for the first time in his life, ~~Peter~~ went to the home of a gentile. When he stepped into the home I'm sure he sniffed the air for that

distinctively unpleasant gentile odor. He was shocked to find the house filled with friends of Cornelius - all gentile dogs. But when he'd been there for awhile he discovered Cornelius was a generous and deeply devout man. ~~It was terribly difficult for~~
^{He discovered}
~~Peter to realize~~ that Cornelius and his gentile friends sincerely wanted to know God.

^{So}
~~Nevertheless~~ Peter began to speak to them about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. He told them about how Jesus would return to judge the living and the dead. "But," Peter said, "we don't need to fear Christ's judgment because everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." Just then the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The gentiles began praising God: "Thank you, Jesus! Allelulia! Praise the Lord!" The Jewish Christians sat there astounded like staid Presbyterians. "I can't believe God gives the Holy Spirit to gentiles," they thought. The foundations of their prejudices were being undermined. Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So Cornelius and his friends were baptized. They were among the very first gentile converts to Christ.

The day Peter stepped into Cornelius's house two conversions took place. Cornelius and his gentile friends were converted to Christ. But Peter and his Jewish Christian friends also got converted. Their hearts began to change towards people for whom they had such deeply rooted prejudice.

Old prejudices are hard to overcome - but they can be overcome by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our church has a long tradition of overcoming prejudice and reaching out to those who've been excluded. ^{In the 1850's - Lincoln University} In the 1860s the session reached out to include ^{growing numbers of} people ^{in Oxford} who weren't traditional Presbyterians by introducing a more inclusive contemporary style of worship. The new church ^{in 1864} was built to include a choir, ~~hymns~~ rather than Psalms, and an organ, ^{both} all of which were fiercely resisted. ^{The church introduced hymns rather than Psalms.} innovations in Presbyterian churches of the day. The church took risks to include people who had been formerly excluded and the Holy Spirit fell upon the church and it grew.

In the 1950s our church attacked prejudice and reached out to people excluded from home ownership in the town. We took a stand for open housing. It was a risky thing to do. But we did it because we believed the Gospel required us to include those whom the community had been excluding.

In the 60's the congregation resisted prejudice and made a decision to include on the session women who had previously been excluded. We were one of the first churches in our Presbytery to ordain women elders. It was controversial but we did it and the Holy Spirit fell upon those who heard the word and our church was greatly blessed.

In the 60's we made another decision to resist prejudice. We decided to include African Americans as members of the church who were previously excluded. I understand that some people left the church as a result but the Holy Spirit fell upon those who stayed and the Lord blessed our church with new growth.

in the 70 Neighborhood Center

- in the early 80's Joy's + Concerns

It's time for us to reclaim our tradition. To hear the Gospel afresh, to identify and reach out and welcome men and women, young and old, rich and poor, to join us in extolling God's greatness in Jesus Christ - to pray for the Holy Spirit to fall upon us afresh.

Who are the people we've been taught to hate and exclude or simply ignore? Who does our church exclude intentionally or unintentionally? Some people in Oxford just assume our church is not for them? Some people assume that we think we're better than people who don't go to church. We need to show them that they're wrong. We're ^{all} sinners who come here looking for God's grace and forgiveness. Some people think our church is for the rich. They're wrong. Some people think our church is only for the old and that we don't listen to the young. We need to show them they're wrong. Some people think our church is frozen in our traditions. ^{That one of our most precious traditions is change,} We need to show them ~~they're wrong~~. And when we do, ^{adapting, so that the Gospel which is always new might be heard afresh.} the Holy Spirit will fall upon us and all who hear the good news.

Let us pray: