

## Wesley United Methodist Church

May 6, 2018

“When the Spirit Moves...”

Acts 10:23b-48

There is an amusing story about a Southern Baptist pastor who answered his phone one day and heard a man’s voice. “Please send six cases of whiskey to my house,” said the voice. “We’re having a party.” To say the least, the pastor was surprised. Southern pastors are not in the habit of delivering cases of whiskey to people’s homes. Even more surprising, he recognized the voice as being that of one of his deacons. Evidently the deacon had been calling the liquor store and dialed the pastor’s phone by mistake.

“Brother Jones,” the pastor said to the man on the other end of the line, “This is your pastor.” It got real quiet on the other end of the line, “Well, pastor,” asked the deacon. “What are you doing at the liquor store?”

Pastors get surprises sometimes. Some are pleasant surprises; some are not so pleasant. And some surprises turn the whole world upside down.

Our scripture today from Acts 10 is about a surprise that turned the world upside down for the early church. Read Acts 10:23b-48

Our story begins with a Roman centurion named Cornelius, a man described as devout and generous. And he was a Gentile. Cornelius had a vision, a vision of an angel instructing him to send for a man named Simon Peter who was staying in a home in Joppa. Cornelius heeded the angel’s instructions and sent three of his men to Joppa to bring Peter back with them.

While the three men were on their journey, something extraordinary was happening in Joppa. This same Simon Peter had gone up to the roof of the house where he was staying to pray and he, too, had a vision. “He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners.

It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’ ‘Surely not, Lord!’ Peter replied. ‘I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.’

The voice spoke to him a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.” While Peter was pondering this vision, the three men sent by Cornelius arrived at the house where Peter was staying. And the Spirit spoke to Peter telling him to go with the three men.

The next day Peter did just that, taking with him a few of his Christian friends. When they got to the house of Cornelius, they found a large group of people gathered there, relatives and close friends of Cornelius. At first, this disturbed Peter. These were Gentiles. It was against Jewish law for him to even associate with Gentiles. But then Peter remembered his dream. God had shown him that he should not call anyone impure or unclean. He asked Cornelius why he had sent for him. Cornelius proceeds to tell him about his own vision—about the angel who had instructed him to send for Peter. Then he told Simon Peter that he was prepared to listen to anything he had to say.

Then Peter began to speak. And he begins with some remarkable words.

He says, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism...”

That’s a radical statement even today. Every group I know expects God to show partiality to its own group. Even football games, people want God to favor their team. Two thousand years ago in Judea, this was a particularly important theme.

The Jewish people had survived by being exclusive. And even the early Christian church restricted itself to those who were circumcised Jews. Now Peter was disregarding all that. No one is to be regarded as impure and unclean. It was an amazing turnabout. Then Peter begins to preach the good news of Jesus Christ.

It was the testimony of one who had experienced Christ’s coming—up close and personal. This brings us to our message for today.

“While Peter was still speaking these words,” says the writer of Acts, “the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.” In other words, Peter didn’t even get to finish his message. He was just getting warmed up when the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles gathered there in Cornelius’ house, much like it came upon the Jews in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. Suddenly these Gentiles were speaking in different languages just as they had spoken different languages on that day when the church was born. It was an amazing event. We’re told that the “circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, ‘Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.’ So, he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ...”

Peter had no idea when he awoke the day before what lay in store for him over the next 36 hours. The whole mission of the Christian community had been turned on its head. Things would never again be the same. That's what happens when the Spirit moves. Things are changed. People are changed. Social situations change. Peter suddenly realized that all people were God's children, and that he dare not refuse baptism to any because of their cultural or racial background.

This truth has been particularly important to us since the days of the Civil Rights movement.

The Civil Rights movement was a shock to American society, but who can doubt it was led by the Spirit of God? When the Spirit moves, walls come down.

So, generally when we come to this text, that's the first thing we see.

It's how the Spirit knocks down walls that separate people. When Peter baptized Cornelius and the other Gentiles, it opened the church to unexpected growth.

Soon those from Gentile backgrounds far outnumbered those from Jewish backgrounds.

Imagine if Christianity had remained a Jewish sect. Would we have the same impact on the world? Not by a long shot.

The one thing that matters is that the followers of Christ share his love with all people—young people or old, rich people or poor, black brown or white—until that day comes when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God. This is our task. That is our reason for being.

We have no other.

This is the reason Christ came into the world—to reach out to all people. Amen.