

## All Are Welcome

ACTS 10:34-43      January 13, 2008

“Then Peter began to speak: ‘I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism.’” That’s how today’s reading in the book of Acts is translated in the New International Version of the Bible. The New Revised Standard Version translates it: “God shows no partiality.” The King James’ version is “God is no respecter of persons”. And the New English Bible’s phrase is “God has no favorites.”

No matter which way it’s translated it’s a pretty radical pronouncement on the part of Peter. Peter was a circumcised, Torah-obedient, card carrying Israelite. If ever there was a people, a country whose identity, whose history, was closely aligned with a sensing themselves to have a unique relationship with God, it was Israel. And yet here was one of their own - one of the original twelve - proclaiming that God didn’t single out any one group of people for special access privileges. Or, put another way and perhaps a more important way, that God didn’t reject anyone because they weren’t a part of some special sort of national, racial or cultural group. But before we do anymore with this radical departure from the commonly held understanding on the part of the early church that Christianity was primarily a Jewish renewal effort, there are two related events the writer of Acts identified as contributing to Peter’s preposterous position.

The first story is recorded in the early part of Acts 10 and has as its central character, Cornelius, a centurion in the Roman army, a commander of 100 soldiers. Cornelius and all in his family were devout and God-fearing, although not believers in Christ. Cornelius was known for his liberal giving to the needy and his regular visits with God in prayer.

One day, while praying, he had this clear vision of an angel of God coming to him. The angel informed him that his prayers and giving had been noticed. Then the angel told him to send some of his men to Joppa to get Peter, which Cornelius did.

The second story happened the next day. While the men sent by Cornelius were approaching the city of Joppa, Peter was up on the roof praying and apparently fasting. Suffering from hunger, he fell into a trance and had a vision that had heaven open and this big sheet let down to earth full of a great variety of animals. Then Peter heard a voice say to him, “Get up Peter. Kill and eat - have your fill.”

Despite Peter’s hunger, the food offered him wasn’t on the approved Jewish menu and so an astonished Peter challenged the offer: “Surely not, Lord! I’ve never eaten anything common or unclean.”

And the voice said to Peter in his dream, “Don’t call anything impure that God has made clean.” And after repeating the exchange three times, the vision vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

While Peter was wondering about the vision, Cornelius’ three representatives showed up. And again the spirit spoke, “Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.”

So Peter got down off the roof and went to the men and said to them, “I’m the one you’re looking for. Why have you come?”

After the men told Peter their story Peter invited them to be his overnight guests. The next day they, along with a few other Christian brothers, headed for Caesarea and Cornelius.

In preparation for Peter's visit, Cornelius had a few people over - just some relatives and close friends. As Peter entered, Cornelius fell at his feet. Peter even here revealed his perhaps unconscious rejection of there being special people in this new religious movement as he said to Cornelius: "Stand up. I'm only a man myself."

When Peter noticed the rest of the people he said to them: "You are all well aware how unlawful it is for a Jew like myself to associate with or visit with people like yourselves, Gentiles. But God has shown me that I should not call anything common or unclean." Then he asked, "May I ask why you sent for me?"

And Cornelius rehearsed his experience ending with: "And here you are and here we are in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord to tell us."

And so Peter began to speak starting with the words we began today's reading with: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism..." Although the scriptures don't spell it out, I think what went through Peter's mind was probably something like: "I think there's a connection, Cornelius, between your vision from the angel telling you that God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor and your being a non-Jew and my vision about a big sheet and a variety of animals that I have in the past regarded as unfit to be consumed by me and being told by God to eat. And I think the connection is that God doesn't determine who the message is for based on color of skin or cultural background or financial status.... God accepts all those who are God-fearing and who do what is right."

And so, having reconciled the interest on the part of the Gentiles with his understanding of who God's message of salvation was for, Peter summarized the faith. I'm sure what's reported in these few verses in Acts isn't the whole of Peter's sermon but it's certainly one of the most concise summaries of the gospel.

Peter told those present earnestly seeking a relationship with God all about Jesus Christ - his baptism, his anointing with the Holy Spirit, his doing good and healing, his crucifixion, his resurrection, the appearances and the belief, taught by the prophets, that those who believe in him receive forgiveness of sins.

And that's where today's reading ends.

But there's still more to the story. While Peter was preaching, a sort of second Pentecost broke out - "The Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message."

And Peter, still discovering what this new understanding of God's not having any partiality meant, asked, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." Risking the shockwaves his actions were going to create in the Jewish Christian community - risking being admonished by his Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ - Peter threw caution aside and ordered those that were gathered with the Roman Gentile centurion in that living room to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. The believers who had come along with him were shocked that the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Gentiles but they couldn't deny what they saw.

Despite Peter's revelation and teaching on the subject, we in the church have had to be pushed by God many times in our history to open our doors to groups of people we've thought didn't belong - weren't acceptable - didn't deserve to gather with us.

One writer summarized our experience, both past and present and probably future with: "From the beginning of the Christian church the problem of who is included and who is not has been chronic. At many points the church has attempted to define its boundaries arbitrarily. And yet, God has always run ahead of the church. In the work of outreach we are always playing catch-up with God. Often by accident, and now and then by prayerful, careful consideration of Scripture, God pushes us beyond the self-imposed barriers we erect."

There was a story awhile back in a ministerial journal about a man who lived in downtown Chicago who was approached by a bag lady one afternoon as he walked along the lakeshore. She sought change to buy food. As the lady stood there with all her possessions in a shopping bag and her hand outstretched, the man refused to give her anything. Remembering the stories he'd heard about others who'd used such donations to buy drugs and being basically a skeptic about such techniques, the man thought he'd call her bluff.

He offered to take her to lunch at a nearby fast-food restaurant. To his surprise she took him up on his invitation. Mary, the bag lady, and the man had lunch while they talked about her family and where she stayed at night and how she'd gotten to this place in her life.

When they finished their meal the man invited Mary to church, really only trying to be polite. She said she would, but the man forgot his halfhearted invitation until the next Sunday morning when several members of the church greeted him with: "A woman named Mary is looking for you." He couldn't believe it. Mary had really come to church!

There wasn't an immediate bond between Mary and the rest of the congregation. There was no question she wasn't one of them. Her dress, her address (or lack of one), her manners, all said, "I'm not one of you." But at the Lord's table - when she received the bread and the wine - the minister said the same thing to her as to the rest: "The body of Christ broken for you; the blood of Christ shed for you." The people began to notice how the words used in worship, in the hymns and prayers, meant indeed that Mary was included. Before long the congregation was converted to see Mary as a neighbor. Finally, Mary got back together with her family through the help of people at Leavitt Street Church in Chicago and today she lives in Milwaukee, and still goes to church. God shows no partiality - all are welcome - and when we accept that truth and live it, amazing things happen.

In his autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi wrote that during his student days he read the Gospels seriously and considered converting to Christianity. He believed that in the teachings of Jesus he could find the solution to the caste system that was dividing the people of India.

So one Sunday he decided to attend services at a nearby church and talk to the minister about becoming a Christian. When he entered the sanctuary, however, the usher refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go worship with his own people. Gandhi left the church and never returned. He once was quoted to have said, "If Christians have caste differences also, I might as well remain a Hindu." The usher's prejudice not only betrayed Jesus but also turned a person away from trusting Him as Savior.

In his video series *Carpe Diem*, Dr. Tony Campolo repeats a story a pastor friend of his shared with him. The pastor friend lived in Manhattan and every morning he would go to a neighborhood diner for breakfast. Every morning the same crowd would be there. One day, the pastor decided to become better acquainted with this crowd that breakfasted with him. He walked around the diner and introduced himself to everyone and invited everyone to introduce themselves to each other, hoping to create a friendlier atmosphere in the place, and it worked.

Well, it worked except for the owner. He would only reveal his name – Harry. After a few weeks passed, all the regulars had become friends and the pastor pressured Harry to reveal a little more about himself. Reluctantly, he told the group that his real name was Hazim and that he was from Baghdad, Iraq. Now, this was during the time when Saddam Hussein was a real threat to world security, and he had missiles trained on places like Tel Aviv. A majority of the regular customers were Jewish, and tensions between Arabs and Jews were running high. You could have heard a pin drop in the diner when Harry announced his national origin.

The next morning the radio reported that the U.S. had begun bombing Baghdad. The pastor quickly finished getting ready and ran to the subway in hopes of reaching the diner before Harry opened for the day to reassure him of his friendship and love. As he rounded the corner where the diner sat, there was a whole group of the regulars lining the sidewalk waiting for Harry. And when Harry arrived, all the customers surrounded him with hugs and words of encouragement. The pastor then offered a prayer for the group.

After the prayer, Harry said gruffly, “You know, you still have to pay for the doughnuts. But from now on, the coffee is free.”<sup>1</sup>

We believe Baptism is both a statement about God’s grace - a recognition of God’s being at work in everyone - and a commitment on our part to enter into the proclamation by living the righteous life. Baptism is both an accepting on our part God’s adoption of us by grace and our commissioning. It’s an acknowledgement of God’s yes of us – God’s covenant to work in the lives of the baptized one. Whenever we are a participant in a baptism we need to hear the voice of Christ introducing us to God with: “This is my beloved brother” - “this is my beloved sister ... I am well-pleased with them and I’m sending them out with a mission in the world.”

God’s grace is for everyone - baptism is an act that reminds the community of faith that God is at work in the lives of people. God’s grace is for you if you’ve never understood it to be before. And for those of us who’ve acknowledged it in the past, then the questions for us are: who do we know who needs to hear the good news about the impartiality of God – who are the Gentiles around us, in our day and in our lives? How are we going to go about living our lives in order that others may come to know God’s grace?

God shows no favorites and as followers of Christ’s, who chose to identify himself with us, we are called – commissioned - to respect all we come in contact with as well. We reveal God’s grace as we freely accept those in need of God’s grace without regard for their social standing, their racial make-up, or the resources of their pocketbooks. God is a gracious God - we are commissioned through our baptism to walk the walk and talk the talk.

Who are the Gentiles around us? Who are the ones we view with suspicion because they are different from us? “Call nothing unclean that comes from God” Peter heard in his dream. All are welcome - All.

1. Dr. Anthony Campolo, from his video series Carpe Diem, Session # 2, “Seize the Moment – With Passion,” Word Publishing, 1994.