

Our story from Acts finds Peter preaching to a man named Cornelius and his household. Cornelius was a Roman centurion who had apparently caught wind of Peter and the others who were teaching about Jesus. So he called Peter to his home and asked to hear about this so-called “good news.” At about the same time that Cornelius was sending his summons, Peter had a vision. In the vision God communicated to Peter that the good news of Jesus Christ was not just for the chosen ones of Israel. It was for the Gentiles as well.

So when Peter went to the home of Cornelius this vision was fresh in his mind. He didn’t go alone but invited some of the other disciples to accompany him. When Peter got up to preach everyone who heard him including the disciples, Cornelius, and all the members of Cornelius’ family were amazed. They all experienced the gift of the Holy Spirit being poured out on the gathering, even upon the members of Cornelius’ family who were Gentiles. So at the end of the story we hear yet another account of a gathering of people who, after hearing the good news of Jesus Christ find themselves so moved and transformed that they want to be baptized into the faith and become disciples of Jesus Christ. Today we will be reminded of this when we witness the baptism of Freya and Martha.

What is amazing about this story is the boldness of Peter and the disciples who went with him to reach out to serve someone who was clearly not a member of their own tribe. Cornelius may have been “God-fearing,” but he was not one of God’s chosen ones. He was not Jewish. And yet Peter and the others did not refuse to serve him simply because he practiced a different religion. Their personal religious beliefs did not compel them to refuse to offer the gracious love of Christ to Cornelius and his family. And what was the result of their bold move? The Holy Spirit was poured out upon all of them! Lives were transformed! People were able to hear the good news of what God was doing in Jesus Christ! Some scholars often refer to this event as the Gentile Pentecost.

What will happen if we who follow Christ today refuse to serve people simply because they do not believe as we do? What opportunities for the Holy Spirit to do his work in spite of us might be missed? How can we who call ourselves disciples of Jesus Christ do any less than these first bold proclaimers of the good news? How can we ever, in the name of Christ, refuse to serve those with beliefs that are different from our own?

This was a very significant moment in the history of the early church. A group of Gentiles, who rated in Jewish eyes on about the same level as the Samaritans, are received into the fellowship of the Christian church. From that moment onwards, the Church is not just local but international- it is not just for the Jews it is for everyone. Some scholars often refer to this event as the Gentile Pentecost. To the amazement of the of the Jewish onlookers the Holy Spirit enters a Gentile household in the same way as it did the Jews at the first day of Pentecost when we are told that devout Jews from every nation heard the word spoken in their own language;

“Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”

They asked the question, “What does this mean?”

No doubt so too did Cornelius, in whose household this occurred as it crowned a longer process of spiritual development. He was a righteous Gentile hungry for the reality he saw in Israel’s faith. God stirred him to send for a Christian preacher to explain it all to him. Just as last Sunday when we heard how God directed Philip to open the eyes of the Ethiopian eunuch, so he directed Peter to carry the gospel across the great gap between Jew and Gentile. As Peter spoke, so Word and Spirit, the story of Jesus and the life of Jesus, met in the hearts and minds of the hearers of the greatest message ever told.

Cornelius and his family were baptized the flowing water witnessing outwardly to the life giving presence of God poured within them. Afterwards they asked Peter to stay with them, to strengthen their understanding of the Gospel and what had happened to them and to deepen their sense of what it is to be a Christian, what it is to belong to the Church.

As John Proctor, a URC theologian once wrote, “Righteous deeds and gospel words, Spirit and sacrament, faith and fellowship- Cornelius and his household would never be the same again. Nor would the Church.” And neither will we.

Amen.