

sermon-5/17/09 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Catching Up with the Spirit”
Acts 10:44-48
By Jim Patten

You know a story is important in the Bible if it is repeated. Apparently Paul’s conversion was extremely important. It is told over and over again in the book of Acts and elsewhere in the New Testament.

So, too, is the conversion of Cornelius. It is told at great length in chapter ten of Acts. Then, in chapter eleven, it is told again in summary form. When you realize that the parchment on which the scriptures were written was expensive, to tell a story more than once was significant. It meant the writer made a choice to tell this story again rather than telling another story he or she would have to leave out.

We know the conversion of Cornelius, the Roman Centurion, the Gentile in other words, was a pivotal story for the early church. Everything about Christianity changed once it ceased to be a Jewish sect and Gentiles were let in. Now you have Christians who don’t know the Jewish scriptures, who don’t practice kosher eating practices, who just don’t feel like true brothers and sisters to the Jewish Christians in that day.

We, in the church today, owe the possibility of being a Christian to this story in Acts ten. We, are, after all, Gentiles. Cornelius is our ancestor in the faith. Thank God Peter was able to recognize God’s voice in his dream and go to Cornelius.

There are several things we might want to pay attention to in this brief passage in Acts ten. What comes before verse 44 as well as what comes after verse 48 are also important. A close reading might help us see new possibilities in our own spiritual journey.

First, the role of the Spirit jumps out at us. The Spirit was the one in control in this story. When the Spirit acts, in this case, the scriptures and tradition take a back seat. Peter’s experience of the Spirit trumped the law.

It is not that scripture, tradition and the law were unimportant. They were central to being a Jewish Christian. But if you had to choose between following those three realities, or going with your experience of the Spirit, Acts says, choose the latter. That is pretty astounding. It is also dangerous. How does one know what the Spirit is saying or where the Spirit is leading?

In this case, the Spirit says Gentiles should be included in the Church. It is hard for us to imagine just how astounding and gross this sounded to those Jewish Christians. Peter stayed with Cornelius for several days after he baptized him. That meant he ate unkosher food. That went against every religious instinct in his body.

We know the rest of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were disgusted by Peter’s actions here. Acts 11:2-3 says, “So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers

criticized him, saying, ‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’” It is hard for us who are not strict Jews to feel the disgust behind those words.

Barbara Brown Taylor tries to help modern Christians get a feel for why Peter was criticized. She compares his eating with Gentiles to someone going into church on a communion Sunday and finding pork chops and Scotch whiskey on the communion table in place of the bread and grape juice or wine. While I realize there might be some who would be pleased to find that, most would be offended. That just isn’t done. That would be about as unkosher as you could get in a Protestant sense.

But Peter felt the Spirit guiding his actions and he could do no other. Some scholars say if Peter did not follow the leading of the Spirit here he would be committing a grave sin. They go back to a verse in Luke’s other book, the Gospel of Luke, and point to 12:10. That says, “And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.”

They say ignoring the Spirit’s leading may be what the Gospel of Luke was referring to when it talks about blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. To know that the Spirit is urging one thing and to not do it, but to say it was gross or evil, is a serious offense against the Spirit of God. To call evil what God calls good is very troublesome.

All of this raises obvious questions for churches like ours when it comes to listening for God’s Spirit or recognizing that Spirit when it comes to us. In our Acts story they knew the Spirit was present because the Gentiles began to speak in tongues. This was very similar to what happened to the disciples on Pentecost when the Spirit descended. Peter says as much. “Wow! They are having the same experience we had. We have to baptize them.” Some have called this story the Gentile Pentecost.

But churches like Newport and many other Protestant churches don’t speak in tongues. In fact, if it ever happened in one of our worship services we would be very uncomfortable. I include myself in that. So how do we know when the Spirit is present in our worship? In one sense the Spirit is always present. Most of the time we don’t recognize it or even have a clue that it is present. It is not part of many people’s expectations or way of looking at the world and their experience in it.

One of the things that scares the living daylights out of me is the fact that the Spirit interrupts Peter’s sermon. Apparently the Spirit was not perceived when he was speaking. It had to interrupt him to speak to those listening to him. That is a preacher’s nightmare. We all hate to think of ourselves jabbering on and on, only to have the Spirit interrupt us to say something important!

Perhaps there are other ways to notice the Spirit in our worship services beyond speaking in tongues. Some have said when people lose themselves in praise the Spirit is present. Praise is far more important to experiencing the Spirit than right theology or the eloquence of the preacher.

When do you lose yourself in praise? Music is one avenue. Our choir and some of the songs or hymns we sing have opened my eyes and heart to God's Spirit on more than one occasion. Maybe it is in our prayer time, or when someone shares from their heart a concern or celebration that the Spirit breaks through your normal mindset. There have been times while I was preaching when the silence in the sanctuary during a pause was so palpable it seemed to shout the Spirit's presence. Those times are rare, humbling and incredibly powerful.

Could a visitor come to Newport and sense the Spirit in our worship? If not, what would need to change to make that possible? I am not talking about pandering to fads in worship styles. I am talking about us getting out of the way so the Spirit can interrupt our being in control and take us places we never dreamed possible. That was Peter's experience leading him to stay with Cornelius and eat his food. I know there are some in this sanctuary who could tell similar stories of how the Spirit led them to do things they had not previously imagined possible.

The Spirit in Acts seems to always run ahead of the Church. It comes across as wild and free and beyond the Church's control. The Church is being the Church when it attempts to catch up to the Spirit wherever it is active, wherever barriers are being torn down, wherever the experience of presence trumps our traditions, our laws, and even the scriptures.

Church historian Rosemary Reuther once said the Church must be organized to do two things. It needs to "pass on the tradition from one generation to another." Tradition is important. It is not a bad thing. But the Church, she says, also needs to "be open to the winds of the Holy Spirit by which the tradition comes alive in each generation." When we catch the winds of the Spirit in our generation, making our traditions come alive, we are in for quite a ride! Amen