

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church
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A Stunning, Unsettling Spirit

Acts 10:44-48

Sometimes I think the Christian life would be simpler if the Holy Spirit didn't get all mixed up in it. We get settled and all cozy like, things going along just fine, and then something comes along to cause trouble. After all, look what happened to Peter and his friends. There they were preaching the good news to a bunch of Gentiles in Caesarea. They went there because of a vision Peter had. Remember? Peter dreamed he was on a picnic, where the only food was forbidden food. Profane. Unclean. Like pork and snakes. A voice said, Peter, eat this. Peter declined. No self respecting Jew would eat that stuff. Then the voice said: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." The whole vision repeated three times. Right after that, three mysterious messengers came to Peter from Cornelius, an officer in the Roman army. Why three visitors? That added to three repeated visions? I tell you, life would be simpler if God didn't do things like that.

Well, when an angel tells you to go, you just go. And so Peter went. And some of the believers from Joppa went with him. They never expected Peter to preach to Gentiles. And when he did, they certainly didn't expect the Gentiles to listen. Then, all of a sudden, Whoosh! The Holy Spirit blew in on the Gentiles and they got all worked up, speaking in tongues, prophesying, carrying on. I can almost hear Peter's friends. "Good grief!" they're saying. "Now what are we going to do? Even the Holy Spirit has come on them. Can you believe it? They're Gentiles, for heaven's sake. Has God lost his mind?" But what are you going to do when the Holy Spirit does that?

Peter wondered aloud: "Can anybody withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" Obviously not. So Peter ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

It didn't end there, you know. When Peter got back to Jerusalem, some of the elders pressed charges against him for conduct unbecoming an apostle. They hauled him before the permanent judicial commission there in Jerusalem. "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" they asked. Wasn't bad enough that he baptized them. He ate with them. Shared their bread. Rubbed elbows at the same table. Stayed the night under the same roof. Well, I don't mean to imply anything inappropriate, but you know what those people are like. To make a long story short, Peter told them the whole story. He told them that the Holy Spirit had fallen on the Gentiles and that he had merely responded to the amazing grace of God, baptizing those Gentiles as believers in Jesus Christ. Surprise! The permanent judicial commission praised God, saying "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

You might think that ended it, but it didn't. Remember, I said it was a long story made short. The ancient church was embroiled in controversy for years, maybe even decades, over the question of the inclusion of Gentiles in the church. So we shouldn't be surprised when similar questions of inclusion embroil today's church in controversy. Shouldn't be surprised if that controversy lasts for years, maybe even decades. You'd think that after two thousand years there wouldn't be any more surprises. You'd think that. But then, keep in mind who's running the show around here. You guessed it: the same Holy Spirit that caused such uproar in Jerusalem and throughout the

ancient world. Same Spirit is still at work today. Still giving the gift of repentance that leads to life to people we can't imagine would listen to what the Spirit was saying. No, it didn't end with Peter in Caesarea or with Paul in Antioch, or Ephesus, or even Rome. That same Spirit is at work today, mixing it up in people's lives, and in some cases driving Christians crazy wondering why in the world God would do something like that.

Well, why would God do that? Why would God open the door to outsiders? Come to think of it, why did God open the door to us? How did we get to be part of the people of God? Isn't it true that we were outsiders once? Oh, maybe we were born into the church family, but that only means our ancestors who were outsiders once, were drawn in. Somewhere back in our lineage the Holy Spirit fell on our ancestors and gave them the gift of repentance that leads to new life. And, truth be told, that same spirit fell on us, whether we felt like outsiders or not, that spirit fell on us and gave us the gift of life in Christ. Can you tell me why? Why would God do that? Why would God open the door to us?

Was it our goodness? Were we such wonderful people that Jesus turned to us and said, please come in and dine at my table? Did we turn to Christ, saying, "Here I am Lord, send me?" as Isaiah did? No, it wasn't our goodness. It wasn't because God was impressed with our credentials. Remember, even Isaiah, that great prophet who spoke those very words, spoke them in awe, amazed that God would ask him to do anything at all. The first word out of Isaiah's mouth was "Woe!" "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips." Doesn't sound like a man with an entitlement mentality. Sounds instead like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "Uh Oh. I'm dead." That's when the angel flew to him with a coal and cleansed his lips, purifying him. It wasn't anything Isaiah did or said. It was an act of God's pure grace.

Amazing Grace, we sing. Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. Of course, none of us linger on that word wretch. If we did, we'd have to be more honest with ourselves. When did our wretchedness turn into Godliness? When did our hearts of stone become hearts of flesh? Or if as I suspect we're still wretched at times, and if we're still hard hearted at times, how did we get here? God's grace is indeed amazing, that Christ would choose people like us to be his disciples, his ambassadors, his representatives on earth. And not because we've turned our hearts and minds towards Christ. No! By God's grace, God himself is turning them slowly towards him. God knows I'm only turning slowly toward him. And you? Well are you really a Christ-like person?

Sometimes I think life for us Christians would be so much simpler if the Holy Spirit didn't just blow wherever it wills. And yet, because it blows wherever it wills, people like us have hope. People like us, who know the pain of exclusion, who have felt the sting of rejection, whose hearts ache in ways that we can only imagine, have hope. Because God is bent on saving not only us, but the whole world. What do you know, "God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life." Praise God, indeed!