

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 10, 2015

The Gentile Pentecost
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys
May 10, 2015

Acts 10:44-48 John 15:9-17

Our two scripture readings on this Mother's Day morning may at first blush appear to be unrelated, but they aren't. They are examples of how we are chosen by Christ, not the other way around. We don't choose Christ. He chooses us but it is up to us to accept him.

Our reading from Acts 10 describes a remarkable event in the history of Christianity, so much so that it is often called "the Gentile Pentecost."

Our scripture reading happens at the end of Simon Peter's sermon preached at the home of Cornelius in Caesarea. Cornelius was as a Roman centurion, a gentile. He had a vision in which an angel told him to send for Peter and he sent two of his servants to Peter.

That same day, Peter had a vision of a sheet descending which contained all kinds of animals, reptiles and birds. Peter heard a voice telling him to kill these animals and eat.

He refused saying that they were impure and unclean, and then he heard a voice three times saying, "*Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.*" (NIV).

Then Cornelius' servants arrived and invited Peter to be a house guest of Cornelius.

Wow! Another prohibition hit Peter dead in the face. Jews didn't eat with gentiles or stay in their homes. Gentiles were impure. They were unclean. But Peter remembered his vision and went, realizing that, contrary to Jewish belief, God doesn't show favoritism but accepts anyone who does fear Him, that is, accepts Him.

Cornelius and his household were "God fearers", those who believed in the God of Abraham but were not Jews. They were excluded from the Temple just as was the Ethiopian eunuch that I talked about last week. They were impure. They weren't circumcised. They weren't Jews.

Peter told Cornelius and his household about Jesus and something astonishing happened, something called the Gentile Pentecost. Suddenly the Holy Spirit fell upon those who were listening to Peter. They began to speak in tongues and began to extol God much as had happened at Pentecost with the Jews, but they weren't Jews. They were gentiles, uncircumcised gentiles at that.

Some Jewish Christians had come with Peter. They were astonished at the Holy Spirit descending upon gentiles, unclean gentiles. How could that ever happen? But it did and realizing the meaning of his vision, Peter had the entire household baptized in the name of Christ. Peter realized that artificial rules set up by men cannot put conditions on accepting those who Christ has chosen.

We set up barriers even today on whom we think should be Christians. Many people use their interpretation of scripture to exclude rather than include. In the words of the Rev. Edyth Pruitt at Fairview Presbyterian Church in Lenoir, "Scripture is used as a battering ram cloaked in the word love." We love you, we accept you, but only if you think as we do.

Rev. Pruitt also quoted Dorothy Day who said, "We only love God as much as we love the person we love the least."

Do we love everyone? Do we love as Christ loved us? Do we really?

Our churches are not growing. Why? In great measure it is because many people view Christians as hypocrites. We espouse love for all yet we exclude those who don't interpret scripture as we do, or who are of a different social class, or who speak a different language, or who have a different color of skin, or who just look different. Jesus didn't have any such restrictions so why do we? Is it any wonder that some people consider Christians to be hypocrites?

Let me reread our gospel lesson, this time from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, The Message:

⁹⁻¹⁰ *"I've loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. If you keep my commands, you'll remain intimately at home in my love. That's what I've done—kept my Father's commands and made myself at home in his love.*

¹¹⁻¹⁵ *"I've told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature. This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends. You are my friends when*

you do the things I command you. I'm no longer calling you servants because servants don't understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I've named you friends because I've let you in on everything I've heard from the Father.

¹⁶ *"You didn't choose me, remember; I chose you, and put you in the world to bear fruit, fruit that won't spoil. As fruit bearers, whatever you ask the Father in relation to me, he gives you.*

¹⁷ *"But remember the root command: Love one another.*

These aren't my words, or Eugene Peterson's, or Luke's --- they are the words of our Lord. He makes no conditions on anyone other than that they accept his offer.

The December 17, 2014 devotional in Our Daily Bread said, in part, *"As believers in Christ, we should never be satisfied to think we have realized some self-proclaimed pinnacle of spiritual success, but rather continue to 'grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.' Jesus reminds us in John 15:16 that the result of healthy growth is continuing to bear spiritual fruit throughout our lives."*

We bear that spiritual fruit by planting the seeds of that fruit with all those we meet and by not setting up artificial barriers to anyone who accepts Christ --- black or white, male or female, rich or poor, etc. The only requirement for membership in this Presbyterian Church, or any other church in the PC(USA) is to accept Christ as Lord --- nothing more; nothing less.

Amen.