

“They Become Us” – Acts 10:34-48

Can you imagine how those disciples with Peter must have been worried? “This is crazy! How are we ever going to explain this when we get back to Jerusalem?! It’s been a strange enough journey down here to Joppa and Caesarea, but this latest thing with these Gentiles is surely the weirdest thing so far. And Peter, instead of putting his foot down, he’s been right there promoting the whole thing, even going so far as baptizing these outsiders. What is the church coming to?”

What indeed, was the church coming to?! Just when things seemed to be settling down, just when the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was being built up, just when things were going so well, living in fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit (Lk 9.31), things all of a sudden seemed to be unraveling. Just when they thought they knew what they were doing, and more importantly what God wanted them to be doing, all of a sudden the game plan seemed to be shifting around them.

Take for example this crazy episode with Peter – how to understand this, let alone explain it to that gang of uptight uprights back in Jerusalem! Peter had been doing well enough on this mission, traveling down to Lydda and then Joppa. There was that triumph for the Lord in Joppa, with the raising of Tabitha, or Dorcas as the Greeks called her. What a day that was, and oh how the people there had rejoiced! No wonder Peter stayed with them for a while. It was great of that Simon to look after him so well while he was there.

But this?! How could this disaster have happened? You’d think Peter wouldn’t even have accepted the invitation to go down to that Cornelius’ house, never mind to actually meet with those Gentiles. And then to actually eat with them, even to stay in his house for a few days, all of that is bad enough, but that he actually baptized those Gentiles – what is the church coming to? This is going to stir the pot back in Jerusalem, for sure!

Stir the pot it did. The controversy over whether non-Jews could be legitimate Christians bubbled and boiled for years. And the great sadness is that the same dividing conflict still spills over even today, almost two thousand years later. While the definition of unacceptable has changed over the ages, the controversy over whether or not to include the equivalent of Gentiles still rages in the church today. Back in the early days of the church, in the days when Peter, James, John, Stephen, Paul and the others spread the word throughout Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, the Gentiles rejected from inclusion were non-Jews, those people seen as not part of the children of God by birth. Those who sat in Jerusalem and who had appointed themselves keepers of the purity of the new church resisted any attempts to let anyone but those just like them be baptized, be fully accepted into the church.

Today the ‘Gentiles’ are those who do not meet artificial standards defined by self-appointed “keepers of the purity” in the church – people sitting in righteous isolation, surrounded by a phalanx of smiling faces protecting them from the impure, from those who they feel would sully and defile the church. The early church struggled with the issues of who was and who was not eligible to be accepted into the church, and the church today still struggles with which Gentiles they will exclude. Whatever the definitions and the reasons, the reality is still all too often a turning away of people seeking to find reconciliation with God.

I can’t for the life of me figure out why people who tell others that they wouldn’t be welcome in their church would believe for a moment that those seekers would want to have anything to do with their exclusive Jesus club! I believe a church should be a place where the gospel is preached, where you can hear the good news of Jesus Christ who died and rose again to

bring forgiveness of sins to *anyone* who believes in him – the same gospel preached by Peter to that assembled crowd in Caesarea.

There are those who would try to rob the gospel of its power, by claiming that that's not what Peter meant, but it's pretty clear from scripture that that is both what Peter said and what Peter meant – forgiveness of sins through the name of Jesus Christ for anyone who would believe in him.

It's not as though Peter invented this claim, or worked it out through a series of study groups, Presbytery meetings, task forces or General Assemblies. Of all people, Peter was perhaps the least likely to spontaneously begin to reach out to those deemed unclean, unacceptable. But then, his action wasn't spontaneous and it wasn't Peter's own doing, it was the word and work of God active in him. Recall that, fresh from healing Dorcas (Tabitha) after she had died and had been prepared for burial, Peter was staying in Joppa with Simon the tanner, when God made it clear to him that the rules of the game had changed not just dramatically but totally. Beginning with a vision of a sheet being lowered from heaven filled with all kinds of creatures considered unfit to eat, God instructed Peter to eat. Good old Peter, always one to lead with his mouth, reacted predictably enough by arguing with God: "No way, Lord!". God, having not only the first but the last word, replied, "Yes, way!" three times, and Peter was greatly puzzled. The voice emphasized to Peter that what God has made clean, he must not call profane.

Then Cornelius, responding to a vision from God, sent men to fetch Peter, and as he arrived at Cornelius' house, Peter then realized what it was all about and understood clearly that the world had just opened up, and that the word of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ was for all who would hear and believe, Gentile as well as Jew. Filled and inspired with this new and radical understanding, Peter began to preach to them, outlining the story of Jesus anointed by God with the Holy Spirit, teaching and healing throughout Galilee, Judea and Jerusalem; Jesus executed on a cross, and then raised by God on the third day, appearing to and eating and drinking with his followers. Peter affirmed that the risen Christ had commanded his disciples to preach to the people, and to testify that Jesus is indeed the one sent by God with ultimate power to judge both the living and the dead, and that in accordance with scripture everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

Before Peter had even finished this proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. Upon Gentiles! Upon those who had no claim whatsoever to being part of the Jewish children of God. Not because they suddenly decided to become Jewish, not because they had demonstrated such a fervent response to the word that Peter preached, not because of the magnificence of Peter's preaching, not because they had covered themselves in sackcloth and ashes, beat themselves up, promised to change, not because they had agreed to 'overcome' their Gentile-ness, not that such a thing would even be possible, not because of any of these reasons but simply because God so willed, those who listened, who heard the word of God proceeding from Peter's lips, received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The untouchable were now touched by God himself, the unclean had been declared no longer profane, the fence surrounding the grace of God had been blown away by God himself. There was suddenly no more 'they', no more "them and us." Race, gender, colour, background, status, history, foibles, weaknesses and most of all sins were no longer a barrier to receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of forgiveness in Christ's name simply through believing in him. The Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.

In the midst of this joyful celebration not everyone was happy, however. Some of the Jewish Christians witnessing this event couldn't believe their eyes. They were astounded that

these undeserving Gentiles were receiving the Holy Spirit simply for believing in Jesus Christ. They must have protested, for Peter challenged them, pointing out that since they also had been baptized with the Holy Spirit then no-one had the right to withhold the water of baptism. God had so clearly included 'them' and now there was only 'us'. It appears that not everyone was immediately convinced because Peter eventually had to order that the new Christians be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Now we all know that change is or at least can be upsetting and so we can perhaps understand how and why the early church went through some unsettling episodes as they grappled with the full meaning of Christ's death and resurrection. By now, however, you would think that the church as a whole would finally 'get it', would grasp that change is not only an inevitable part of life but an inevitable part of church life as well. But it seems that's not quite the case, as the church has often forgotten the dynamic start experienced by Peter, and Paul, and the other apostles in those early days. Many congregations today have fossilized, longing for the way it was, trying desperately to make sure there are no changes, no disruptions by people unlike themselves. Sadly that is a certain path to irrelevancy and death.

The message of this episode remains quite clear, even if some reluctance continues after two thousand years – the water of baptism cannot be withheld from those who believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. The gift of the Holy Spirit is neither from our hands nor limited by our shortcomings, but flows graciously from God. Neither can the loaf nor the cup be withheld from those who live secure in the forgiveness of sins given through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus, for indeed it is Christ who has been ordained as the judge of the living and the dead. In Christ there is no more 'they', no more 'them and us' for we are bound together as one through the loving grace of God. So come to the table, all you who know that whatever your background, whatever the path or journey that brings you here, you are also covered and included by the redeeming gift of Christ's death and resurrection. Come, share the bread of life that he offers, and be once again renewed.