

## **One of Us – The Gentile Pentecost**

**Acts 10:1-48**

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**June 19, 2022**

We've been talking about the Holy Spirit since Easter season, recognizing the season of Pentecost, or the day that the Holy Spirit came to the disciples in Jerusalem. We are continuing on a little bit beyond Pentecost, and today we are talking about the Holy Spirit coming to the Gentile, or the non-Jewish church as well.

In our story today, we read about something that caused quite a stir among the Jewish church. In the story of the Jewish nation, the picture has always looked like two separate circles.

Then we come to this story. Some of the things I notice:

The Spirit speaks to the centurion as well as Peter!

Suddenly, the picture changes. It becomes a Venn diagram of us and them, with the overlap of people who respond to the voice of the Spirit.

The second thing I notice is that the Gentile is given instructions while the Jew is convicted of racism!

At first, this seems backwards, or awkward, or somehow incorrect. But in fact, there is a beautiful symmetry here that takes place.

Note that for Cornelius to send men to a Jew in a posture of learning would also require humility, and would have been costly to his own pride as a Roman soldier. And he does need teaching! The first thing he does when Peter shows up is worship Peter, the deadly sin of idolatry! Peter quickly corrects him. Cornelius and his household need to know how to pursue their passion for God!

Peter is likewise shown a vision, and what he needs to know is given to him, and he responds to this with incredible humility and teachability. And Peter, the rock, needs teaching! He is being shown that his picture of the world, of God, and the mission of Jesus is still so much grander, huger, bigger, than he thought.

How often we consider correction from God to be punishment. But the correction and discipline of God looks pretty much exactly the same as direction from God in this story. What is very striking is the similarity of the experiences between a Jewish apostle, the religious leader and head of the fledgling Christian church on earth, and the Roman soldier, a commander of the military occupation forces.

This, friends, is what shocks Peter, and I suspect the whole Jerusalem church, right down to the ground.

“God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.”

Finally, we come to the correction of our vision. This, then, is God’s circle – One circle.

No matter how big I pray or think, God is bigger.

How small my thinking and dreaming! How limited my vision of God’s grace, love, plan, and purpose.

In the bible, we read that this is a common problem, people having too small a vision of God.

Cain: even Abel?

Abram: even a childless, barren couple?

Scouts: even against a land of giants?

Isaiah: even the king of Babylon?

Ezekiel: even exiles?

Peter: even Roman soldiers? Even gentiles?

Me: even. . .

There are two verses that are very popular, and that bear reading often!

The first is Ephesians 3:17b-19.

I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, <sup>18</sup> may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, <sup>19</sup> and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

The second one is Ephesians 3:20-21.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. . .

Although that second one often gets misquoted, as God can do even more than we can ask or imagine.

First of all, did you know that those two verses are side by side in the scripture? I didn’t really realize that until I was today years old.

God’s ability to do more than we can ask or imagine is tied inseparably to the incomprehensible scope of his love for us. But there is more. These verses are all in the context of Paul’s love for, teaching to, and imprisonment because of, his ministry to the gentile church, the very people that Peter struggled to comprehend God’s love for. I want to pull a Paul Harvey moment here, and set up the rest of the story.

Here is Ephesians 3:1-6, 14-21:

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—

Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

God's ability to do more than we can ask or imagine is not only inseparable from the incomprehensible bigness of his love for us, but also his radical ability to include those whom we would think should be excluded. Friends, there are only two categories in the Kingdom of God, and that is creator and created. And God loves what he has created.

Today is about the bigness of God, the good news, and our own boldness to dream in the kingdom. This doesn't mean that it is all a cakewalk, that God is the kindly grandfather who refuses to correct and discipline his kids. Far from it.

Peter has to let go of some of his cherished beliefs, part of what he thinks make him who he is, in order to experience the fullness of God's kingdom, which, it turned out, was radically larger than he was comfortable with.

Cornelius had to send for a Jewish teacher to come and explain things to him, showing humility and teachability, which are both simply a willingness to admit that we don't have it right!

Over the last several months, we've heard some things about the Holy Spirit that don't sound very Baptist. They are challenging for us, because they might not line up with our own belief, or experience, or even what we want! Maybe these things are only for the first years of the church.

Let me tell you a story about a person I met in Lebanon.

This is the story of the son of our guide in Lebanon, who became involved with a church that is involved with food aid to Syrian refugees in the encampments in northern Lebanon. I will call him Aaron. One month, his team was faced with the dilemma of having 120 food vouchers which would expire at the end of the month, but 400 families that needed them. So, they sat down and made two lists. The first list were the most desperate. The second list were in need, but he hoped that they could hang on.

Aaron distributed all of the vouchers save one, and they had one family left on the first list. He called them, but found out that they had returned to Syria. So, he began to phone the second list. First call, no response. Second call, and the family was out of the country, unable to return in time to use the voucher. For no real reason, Aaron decided to skip names three and four, and also decided not to phone the fifth family, but to make a house call.

When he arrived at their tent, a ten-year-old boy opened the door. Aaron said that he was with the Church, and he was there to bring them some help. The boy responded, "I know. We are expecting you."

This surprised Aaron, but he thought that perhaps they had heard that the church was helping and they had somehow gotten word. But when he walked into the tent, the mother and her extended family were sitting in a gathering, waiting.

The mother told the boy to tell Aaron the story.

The boy had gone to bed the past night with no food. He was in despair, thinking that they had fled death by war on Syria only to die of starvation in Lebanon. He fell asleep expecting to die. In his dreams he saw a man with shining white clothes and a shining face, walking on the water. This is a young Muslim boy who has not heard the stories of Jesus. He asked the man who he was, and the man told him, "I am Jesus. Tomorrow, I am sending someone to you to tell you about faith, hope, and love." This dream repeated itself three times, and then the boy woke up. He went, told his mother who believed him, and gathered her family into her home to wait.

The mother and her son now meet with Aaron in a discovery bible study to learn more about the God who listens to prayers.

Imagine the love of God for a Muslim child, that He arranged for a Christian to take food to a Muslim family in miraculous response to his own dream. M had no idea that he was a miracle. He was just delivering food.

It seems that God's vision for his church, his kingdom, and the message of his grace and love, is still bigger than we seem to be able to comprehend! He is not limited by us!

Here is what I hear the spirit saying to the church today:

Have you ever been told that you are unsavable? That God does not love you? That you are not welcome in the church?

That you have to do the right thing, or love the right people the right way, or conquer your own addiction or habits, before God wants you in his church, in his kingdom?

It is simply not true. Remember the third circle.

Here is what the Holy Spirit says to you:

<sup>28</sup> “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matt 11:28-30)

You, my friend, are beloved of God, and he wants you in his kingdom so that you can experience the fullness of life that he has always intended for you. He has always loved you, enough that Jesus came to humanity while we were still in full rebellion against God, to die and rescue us from sin and slavery. Let no one tell you differently!

Second, there is a persistent thought that the church is only for a select few, and that there are insiders and outsiders. This, I believe, is not only a wrong picture of God’s love and grace, but also a sinful misrepresentation of God by the church. There are none who are created in the image of God that are not wanted in his kingdom. If there are those that we, as the church, have written off, or would not celebrate seeing in the pew next to us, then we have to check our own hearts, and ask God to reveal the hidden prejudices that limit our understanding of His heart!

2 Peter 3:8-9 says:

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

Lord God, reveal those around us to us, so that we can see people the way you see them, desire their kinship with us as your people, and long to see all people come to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Benediction:

As we read out of Ephesians, this is my prayer for us this week:

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.