

Sermon: Even to the Gentiles

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **John 13:31-35; Acts 11:1-18**

Everybody's a critic. Jesus was often criticized for eating with tax collectors and other sinners, and now it's Peter for eating non-kosher food with Gentiles. It seems that some things never change. But today's passage from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles was important in the formation of the early church. Up to now, Peter and the apostles – formerly disciples – had only proclaimed the risen Christ to other Jews. Now, they're seeing new possibilities.

Luke addressed both his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles to one Theophilus, which may refer to an historical person or to any one of us, because his name means 'lover of God.' Luke's goal, he tells us at the beginning of his Gospel, is to provide an orderly account so that we may know the truth.

With that to guide us, we know that whatever Luke tells us is for our own good. He thinks we need to hear what he is telling us, and he's telling us for a reason.

So, Luke tells this story twice. First, he tells it as it happens, beginning with the separate visions that Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and Peter saw. Peter, a little puzzled, was still thinking about his vision when the Holy Spirit said to him, 'Get going!' Accordingly, he went to visit Cornelius and his family, who gathered around to listen to all that the Lord had commanded Peter to say. Peter, after realizing that God shows no partiality, preached to them and taught them about Jesus and his message. And while he was preaching, the Holy Spirit 'fell upon all who heard the word' (10:44). Seeing this, Peter and his disciples baptized everyone in the house in the name of Jesus Christ.

Then Luke tells the story again, this time when Peter reports back to the group in Jerusalem. Even though they come at him pretty hard, Peter doesn't respond angrily to his critics. He simply tells the story, 'step by step.' The Holy Spirit, he said, came to them just as it came to us. Peter understood that the Spirit was a God-given gift and who was he to get in the way?

Luke writes that ‘When they heard this, they were silenced,’ but in a good way. *And* they praised God, both entirely appropriate responses to what they had heard.

These are eye-witness accounts of the Holy Spirit at work, first with Cornelius and his family and again in Jerusalem with the Christ-followers there who all happened to be Jewish. This is an important turning point for the early church. They saw that to grow and gather in more people, they could make no distinction between them and us. All ‘barriers to entry,’ so to speak, had to come down. Everyone now understood that God’s life-giving gift of repentance was available to all who wanted it, and it was their job to proclaim it, in their words and in the way they lived.

Now, it doesn’t come out in the reading, but it was important that the church came to this conclusion from the testimony of someone like Peter, who was there at the beginning, or from some other apostle who had known and worked with Jesus, rather than someone like Paul, a recent convert. That testimony helps explain how this experience came to unite the church, rather than divide it. The believers were not reluctant to voice their differences, but they were open to discussing them and resolving them, as they did here.

And they did it not through debate, which must have a winner and a loser, but by telling the story, because stories help bridge the gap and make winners out of everyone.

Unfortunately, this new and unexpected church growth included separation from the ‘home faith.’ This was bound to happen, but by adding Gentiles to the mix, it made the break with Judaism complete. Up to this point, the Christ-followers were viewed as just another oddball sect. After this, they became an independent faith community.

We hear this story differently than Luke’s audience did simply because we are the Gentiles. We’re the ones they let in! The arguments against allowing people like us into the church have long been resolved by incidents such as this. We no longer make distinctions between them and us. In theory.

Have you noticed that people don’t take criticism as well as they used to these days? Whether it’s on the news or what we witness for ourselves out in the world, it seems that people go from zero to angry in about three seconds or less. This carries over into other aspects of our lives too, from home to office to sporting events. People argue and make distinctions all the time about all sorts of things.

And it's not just people. Organizations, churches included, often break down when a new idea or a new process disrupts life in the community, bumping it out of its current steady state into an unstable condition that leads to bad feelings. All Peter did was have dinner with a Roman centurion; what could possibly go wrong with that?

His church grew because it opened its doors to everyone, and it proclaimed a consistent message. Now churches have a new problem. Now, churches struggle to keep people not just in the building but in the faith too. There are more than 1200 church denominations in the United States alone. Our tendency to make distinctions among ourselves based on how we think we should 'do church' is proving to be a problem as almost all of these denominations are experiencing declining numbers.

In Peter's time, engaging in religious life was a given. Now, of course, it's different. Nearly 52% of those who responded to a 2017 MissionInsite survey described themselves as being a 'spiritual person,' yet only 27% felt it was important to attend religious services. Almost 64% reported that they had no involvement with a religious congregation or community at all. We are left to wonder why.

Peter and his faith community – the new Christian church – discovered for itself that our ways of separating people into clean or unclean, Us or Them, stood in opposition to their faith, so they made some changes to accommodate everyone who wanted to come in. Paul said in his second letter to the church in Corinth that 'from now on, we regard no one from a human point of view' (2 Cor 5:16); 'So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new' (5:17)!

There is a saying in motorsports that 'horsepower gives you top speed, but torque gets you there.' Horsepower measures how much energy an engine produces, whereas torque measures the engine's twisting force.¹ One horsepower equals a horse's ability to pull a 33,000-pound load across a measured distance in one minute. Torque tells us how easy it is to get a vehicle to move or for it to change its speed.

This could be a terrible analogy for a church but I'm going with it.

It doesn't matter how many horses are available for pulling as long as they all pull in the same direction. What matters is getting the vehicle moving.

Jesus said:

‘I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.
Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.
By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,
if you have love for one another’ (John 13:34-35).

As far back as Leviticus 19, people have known about the commandment to ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’ So, what’s new here? Only the *source* of this love: Jesus himself wants us to love one another as *he* has loved us. It’s a higher bar.

If we can love one another even in difficult times, that’s a sign that we understand enough to *do* what Jesus taught us. When that kind of love takes root deep inside, then maybe we can express it by what we do in the community, in how we live, and not simply in what we say.

Whenever Bob makes a run down to the food pantry to help feed people we’ll never meet, or when Marion sends a letter to Ahmad in Jakarta, or whenever we share a meal in fellowship, we’re living outside ourselves as Jesus’ disciples, making no distinction about those we serve.

Just as the Holy Spirit kept after Peter to get up, get going, and do his job for all who wanted to know about the word of God, so too will our love for one another be the torque that gets the vehicle up to speed, regardless of horsepower. And maybe then we’ll be like Peter and see how many others the Holy Spirit will call us to gather in.

Amen.

¹ <https://pediaa.com/difference-between-horsepower-and-torque/> accessed 17 May 2019.