

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE:

As our church calendar transitions from two services to one next week, many of you (especially younger families) might be tempted to skip the routine of church. I understand – really, I understand. Just because I wear a collar doesn't mean I don't enjoy sitting on the deck with my family, enjoying a cup of coffee and the paper in the morning! But I want to encourage you to resist that temptation for two reasons. First, if you really want your kids to have faith, it's not enough to bring them to Sunday School – they have to see *you* model a year-round habit of worship. From our end, we are making every effort for worship this summer to be family friendly – so bring the kids, and let's not worry too much about squirming. The second reason I want to encourage everyone to keep worshiping through the summer is this: we are $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through our series “50 Stories We Can't Live Without” – and having made it this far, you can't put the book down now!

We are at a crucial juncture in the Bible's story: the birth of the early church. You remember a few weeks ago we celebrated Pentecost, when after Jesus had died and was raised and ascended into heaven, God sent the Holy Spirit to his followers who had gathered in Jerusalem. On Pentecost, the *disciples* were baptized with the Spirit *just as Jesus had been* when he began his ministry. So just as Jesus was sent out into the world to teach and heal and proclaim God's justice, now his disciples were sent out to do exactly the same thing.

Now, you know that Jesus' ministry reached out to all kinds of, shall we say, suspect people. One of the things that kept getting him in trouble with the Pharisees was his propensity to eat with sinners, talk with prostitutes, visit the homes of tax collectors, and touch unclean people. It wasn't Jesus' generous spirit that offended them; it was his flaunting of God's law. But one thing was clear: it was to the people of Israel that Jesus was sent, and with less than a handful of exceptions, it was only Jewish people whom he taught and healed, with whom he argued or invited to follow him. Jesus was a *Jewish* leader sent to the *Jewish* people. He understood his mission that way; his disciples

understood his mission that way; even his enemies understood his mission that way.

So when his disciples were commissioned by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they understood their mission that way too. They were sent as ambassadors of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, to invite God's chosen people to salvation. This was not a shift *away* from God's call to Abraham in the book of Genesis, God's call to his tribe to be a chosen people and a blessing to many nations. This was not a break *away* from God's liberation of the Jews as slaves in Egypt, or God's gift of the Ten Commandments in the desert at Sinai. This was not a break *away* from God's gift of the Promised Land to his people as a fulfillment of his covenant. This was not a break *away* from the Messianic hope that had been promised through the prophets. The gift of the Spirit at Pentecost was a *fulfillment* of God's promises to his chosen people. At least, that's what they thought it was. Until this moment [A reading from Acts chapter 10]

In Caesarea – a Roman town on the coast of Israel – in Caesarea there was a Gentile man named Cornelius, a high-ranking soldier of the Italian Cohort. He was a devout man who, though he was Gentile, had come to learn of the Jewish God, and was in awe of God along with all his household. He gave alms generously for the Jewish people and prayed constantly to God. One afternoon around three he had a vision; an angel came and said to him, “Cornelius.” Terrified, he said, “What is it, Lord?” “Your prayers and alms have ascended to God. Now send to the city of Joppa for Simon, who is called Peter.” When the angel left, he sent three men to Joppa.

The next day at noon as they were approaching, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He grew hungry and while his food was being prepared, he had a vision. He saw the heaven opened and a large sheet being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of mammals and reptiles and birds. A voice said, “Get up, Peter, and eat.” But Peter said, “No, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is unclean according to the law of Moses.” A second time the voice said, “What God has made clean you must not call profane.” This happened three times, and the vision ended.

While Peter was puzzling over his vision, the men sent by Cornelius appeared and the Spirit said to him, “Receive these three who have come for you.” When he received them they said to him, “Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, respected by the Jewish nation, was directed by an angel to send for you.” So the next day he and some of the other believers went with them to Caesarea, where Cornelius was waiting for him with his friends and family.

But Peter said to them, “You know that according to God’s law it is wrong for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone unclean. Why did you send for me?” And Cornelius shared with him his vision.

Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee ... how God anointed Jesus with the Holy spirit and with power. ... He commanded us to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.”

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised Jewish believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. Then Peter said, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Second lesson: This is what happened next (Acts 11:1-18)

There are certain moments in our faith history that are utterly pivotal. The call of Abraham. The exodus from Egypt. The Ten Commandments at Sinai. The anointing of King David. The Temple in Jerusalem. The fall of Israel and Judah to foreign nations, and the exile to Babylon. The prophets call to repentance and the hope of the Messiah. The life of Jesus: his birth and baptism,

his teaching and healing, his death and resurrection. The baptism of the church at Pentecost. And this moment: this moment when God's call to the children of Abraham was turned on its head ... when Peter welcomed the Gentile Cornelius to receive baptism without undergoing conversion to Judaism first through circumcision

What does it mean for us? Let me say just a few very brief things.

First, this lesson should give us comfort whenever we find ourselves in times of social or spiritual change, and we have to wrestle with discerning God's will. The critical question of whether or not to welcome Gentiles was the first of many disagreements over the will of God. Disagreements and uncertainty are not marks of faithlessness. Rather, the struggle of discernment has *always* been a part of the church's life from the beginning.

Second, this lesson reminds us to be open to the possibility of God's will *changing*. I do not doubt that God called the children of Abraham to be his chosen people. But I also trust that God expanded that invitation in the fullness of time. How different the church would look today if the early Christians had not been open to the possibility that God wanted to do something new – something scandalously new – by welcoming the Gentiles into the church. This doesn't mean that God's will is unreliable. It does mean that God is still active in our world today, providing all of us, ordinary Christians, with new insight and wisdom and courage for our time.

Third, this lesson teaches us that as we try to discern what God's will is for us, we should remember the principle that God revealed to Peter: God shows no partiality, but anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. Inclusion, rather than exclusion, is God's desire for the church. That doesn't mean that "anything goes." We must never confuse the fads and whims of our society with God's will. But Peter, for one, was startled at how large the circle of acceptability was drawn. For us that means that God may choose some whom *we* find unacceptable but who have clearly manifested the gifts of the spirit. As it was when Peter baptized Cornelius, so it was last century when women were first ordained as deacons, elders, and ministers of the Word, even

when to do so apparently contradicted what people had until that time understood Scripture to say.

Finally, in spite of all that, it's important to remember that Scripture never changes, and the Bible must be our primary and fundamental source of knowledge of the will of God for our lives. The Bible is God's Word to us. Nevertheless, it is a basic understanding of our Reformed tradition that God is sovereign over everything – even the Scripture. The Bible is not *God* ... it is *God's*. Even as we search the Scripture for God's desire for our lives, today's story reminds us to remain open to God's sovereignty in all things. God may at times choose to challenge our understanding of his will, for our understanding will always be provisional and incomplete.

It is not easy, this business of faith. In an age as rapidly changing as ours, it's helpful to remember that we are not the first to be astonished, troubled, and perplexed about just what God's will is. Most of all, it is crucial that we remember that God's will is not ours to decide. It is ours only to try to discern – prayerfully, humbly, diligently.

How do we do that? The same way Peter and Cornelius and the early church did it ... the same way Christians have always done it. Know the Scripture. Pray. Look to see where the Holy Spirit is giving gifts. Talk with other Christians. And be open to whatever God is trying to say to you, even if it is radically new. Change is not always God's will. But neither is staying the same.

Amen.