

“Dealing With a God Who Won’t Behave”

A Sermon Based on Acts 11:1-18
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
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How do you prepare for the unexpected, the unpredictable, the unanticipated, the serendipitous? How can anyone prepare for such? Maybe a better question is how do we remain alert day by day so that when the unexpected assaults us we can receive it as the gift that it is?

Rare is the person who does this well. Even preachers have a hard time getting it right. A minister in Florida lamented that it was difficult to get his message across to his congregation: "It's so beautiful here in the winter," he said "that heaven doesn't interest them. And it's so hot here in the summer that hell doesn't scare them."

Most of us are lulled to sleep by our routines. And so, much more often than not, we find ourselves lying flattened by the unexpected. When we come to our senses following the encounter, we take time and we expend no small amount of energy trying to catch up, to come to terms with the experience.

This is especially true, and more difficult, when the unexpected compels us to change our lives. Sometimes, some of us roll with the punches. Other times, we do not. Which is why one person has noted that “change is certain; progress is not.”

What is it that makes the difference between remaining stuck and growing in grace? The answer is not a what, but a who. The Holy Spirit is the one who makes it possible for us to pick ourselves up, appreciate a new perspective, and to grow in grace, and in depth, to become more Christ-like.

Still, even with God’s help, it ain’t easy. If growth were a picnic, wouldn’t everyone be doing it? And it can even be risky. Sometimes our growth comes like a spurt. It causes us to stick out. And the next thing we know is that people are wanting to put us back in line.

II

So it was for Peter, the one Jesus named Rock. On him, the Church was to be built. He was to be a sure foundation. Solid. Dependable. Predictable. Unchanging. For the first disciples, this meant being solidly Jewish, dependably kosher, predictably pure, just as they had always been.

When Peter travels to Caesarea, enters the house of a gentile, a gentile who is a Roman military man, an oppressor, and baptizes him and his whole house, trouble was sure to hit the fan. And it did.

The leaders in Jerusalem hear about Peter's activities. When he returns to Jerusalem they call him on the carpet. They "protested to him and said, 'So you have been visiting the uncircumcised and eating with them!'" They were not at all pleased that Peter had broken with tradition, and they insisted he explain himself.

During a service at an old synagogue in Eastern Europe, when the Shema prayer was said, half the congregants stood up and half remained sitting. The half that was seated started yelling at those standing to sit down, and the ones standing yelled at the ones sitting to stand up.

The rabbi, learned as he was in the Law and Commentaries, didn't know what to do. His congregation suggested that he consult a house-bound 98-year-old man, who was one of the original founders of their temple. The rabbi hoped the elderly man would be able to tell him what the actual temple tradition was, so he went to the nursing home with a representative of each faction of the congregation.

The one whose followers stood during Shema said to the old man, "Is the tradition to stand during this prayer?"

The old man answered, "No, that is not the tradition."

The one whose followers sat asked, "Is the tradition to sit during Shema?"

The old man answered, "No, that is not the tradition."

Then the rabbi said to the old man, "The congregants fight all the time, yelling at each other about whether they should sit or stand..."

The old man interrupted, exclaiming, "That is the tradition!"

Well, Peter knew very well what the tradition was. But Peter had changed. He was living out of a new orientation. When the leaders demand he explain himself, when they not so subtly try to put him back in his place, Peter won't let them do it. He doesn't seem to be afraid. He doesn't try to make nice. He simply tells them the story of what happened.

He tells them that he had a vision. Cornelius had a similar vision. Together, their visions answer the question about purity. Could Peter enter the house of a gentile, share table fellowship with him and his family, and then baptize them all, which would mean that they all, all of those supposed unclean gentiles would be welcomed to the communion table? Should he have done that?

The visions both of them had said yes. What is more, the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that had filled them on Pentecost had filled Cornelius and his household. How could that have happened if it were wrong?

And, to prove the case, Peter had taken along six other people with him. That is no minor detail in this story. Together with Peter, those six make seven, seven witnesses to all that took place. Seven witnesses were need to prove a case.

Finally, Peter reminds them that this fulfilled the words of Jesus, who told them about being baptized by the Holy Spirit. As much as it might be unexpected, or even unwanted, it was crystal clear that God had granted the gentiles the same gift the Jews had been granted. Who, then, were they to stand in the way?

For a moment, the leaders are silent. That silence could mean a number of things. That the silence is followed by praise shows that they realize how bold, and frightening, is this new chapter in their lives. God is doing a new thing among them. They understand how blessed they are to behold it.

Which is not to say that they adjusted, just like that. This was something completely unexpected. They did not reorient themselves over night. What they did do was commit themselves to the new tradition, to follow wherever God led them.

III

This story of the encounter Peter and Cornelius had with one another and with the Holy Spirit was very important for the early church. Its importance is suggested by how much space in the Acts of the Apostles is given to it. A chapter and a half. The events are told not just once, but twice.

It would have been so easy for the followers of Jesus to remain just another sect within Judaism. What this story tells us is that God was not content to allow that to happen. The Good News was not merely for the Jews. It was for the world, Jews and gentiles, slave and free, men and women. It was for everyone.

So although this direction was a new one for the disciples, it was not a new direction and decision for God. In making the covenant with Abraham, God told him that all nations would be blessed through him. And so, from ancient times, God has been moving in the direction of the salvation of all of humanity. Everyone. What happened to Peter and Cornelius is one more part of that long story and struggle.

Without doubt, this story generates a certain kind of terror. It clearly reminds us that the Spirit remains free. The Spirit is not bound by our opinions or morals or laws. God's Spirit continues to bring about God's intentions in the most unanticipated ways. If the first disciples, who were near to Jesus, were unprepared for the Spirit's new initiative, how much more are we likely to be unprepared?

Naturally, this takes the shine off of our confidence that we have everything all figured out and well under control. We do not. That is a realization which, if it does not scare us, at least makes us uneasy. Maybe cautious. Ideally, humble.

It also must be said that this story liberates us and banishes fear. Yes, the Spirit of God moves in mysterious ways. But that Spirit, in other ways, is also remarkably predictable. All that God does is consistent with what God has done before. What the Spirit does will always be consistent with a love for the world for which Christ died.

The amazement we feel in the face of the Spirit's new directions will always be accompanied by joy over the spirit's love. Again, this is not to say that any of this is easy. It is not easy. But this is how the Holy Spirit works. The question is one of faith. Will we follow where the Spirit leads, even when that leading is against our upbringing, even when it contradicts what we think is right?

IV

So who is the real hero in this story? It is not Peter or Cornelius. It is the One who prodded them to act, and the One who makes promises and keeps them. The Holy Spirit is the hero in this story.

God finds a way, even in the midst of class and racial distinctions, even in the midst of nationalism and social constraints. God finds a way to break salvation out of the fences we so often build for it.

What is more, gentiles like Cornelius are included, not because they are basically nice people, but because they are able to repent. Look again at verse 18, "God has clearly granted to the gentiles too the repentance that leads to life." God has granted repentance to them. Repentance is not a person's brave first step toward Christ. It is not some sort of "feeling-sorry-for-my-sins."

Repentance is a gift of God that enables us to turn toward the truth. We cannot make that turn on our own. That is the great myth of the revival tradition, and of our time, that we are the ones who decide for Jesus. No! God does it for us. In Christ, God has turned toward us and granted us repentance.

If you read the story again, you will see that Peter and Cornelius are surprisingly passive in the story. It is as if they are being carried along by the Spirit, reacting and trying to keep up with events beyond their control. *This is the way it is with repentance.* It is more than a decision we make. It is more than a good deed we offer. Repentance is the joyful human response to God's offer of Godself to us. It is an act of God's grace.

The Good News is that everyone may now turn to God. As Ephesians reads, "...in Christ Jesus, you that used to be so far off have been brought close, by the blood of Christ. For he is the peace between us, and has made the two into one entity and broken down the barrier which used to keep them apart, by

destroying in his own person the hostility, that is the Law of commandments with its decrees.”

God is the author of salvation. And in writing it for all of us, it has sometimes looked as if God was breaking the rules. God has this habit of not behaving as we expect. What we see, after our encounters with God’s unexpected new directions and unanticipated actions, is that we are the ones who have not been behaving properly. God is consistent. What looks inconsistent at first to us, is, in reality, God’s actions to expand our horizons.

So what do we do when God won’t behave? Silence is an excellent first response. Follow the silence with praise. And then try to keep up. For while God may reorient us from time to time, God’s consistent desire always is to lead us home. Thanks be to God. AMEN.