

“LITTLE THINGS WITH BIG MEANING: VI – A SHEET”

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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-21

Acts 10:9-16

One week recently, we had a lot of really windy days. I can't even remember what week it was – all the weeks of this pandemic are just seeming to run together. But I think it was last week, when we had day after day of really windy weather. On one of those days, I decided to go out onto the back porch of the parsonage and work on my sermon. Turned out not to be such a good idea, because the wind was blowing my papers all over the place – I spent more time trying to keep them in place than actually writing. On top of that, I was sneezing like crazy, because the wind was stirring up all the pollen in the air! Crazy times!

I thought of those windy days this week as I wrote this sermon for Pentecost Sunday, especially because Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles, described the Spirit of God descending that day with a sound like the rush of a violent wind! The Spirit of God who was present in the very act of creation, now came again as Jesus had promised before he ascended into heaven. You heard Joe read the lesson. People from all over were gathered together in Jerusalem, and the Spirit descended, and even though the people spoke every different language imaginable, when the disciples spoke, they understood it in their own language! It was absolutely incredible, and so filled with the Spirit were they, so convicted of faith in Jesus were they, that Luke tells us that 3000 people came to faith that very day, and so it has become known as the day the church was born.

The great movement of Christianity took hold that day, and spread far and wide, and wouldn't it be nice to say that everything from that point on was smooth and wonderful? Ah, but it wasn't, because the church in that day, like the church in our day, got stuck in some ruts – not the least of which was deciding who was out and who was in – who was worthy and who was not.

Fast forward from the Day of Pentecost, to the lesson we heard from the 10th chapter of Acts – where Peter has a vision of a sheet. At that time, the faithful were Jewish, including, of course, all of the disciples. Jesus spent time with them, he was in ministry with them.

If a non-Jew (a Gentile) happened to come to faith in Jesus, then it was expected that person would have to convert to Judaism to be included in the faith community. There really was no ministry to the non-Jews, the Gentiles

Well, along comes this man named Cornelius. The scripture describes him as a centurion of the Italian Cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household, a man who was generous in giving and devout in prayer. One day, Cornelius had a vision in which an angel of the Lord told him to send to Joppa for a man named Peter. And so he did. Cornelius sent two of his slaves to fetch this man he had never met, Peter, and to bring him back with them.

Meanwhile, while those two are on their way, Peter goes into a time of prayer up on a rooftop. And while he prayed, he too, received a vision from God – a rather strange vision. In it, Peter saw the heavens opened up and something like a large sheet coming down. In the sheet were all kinds of animals, and all of a sudden Peter hears a voice telling him to get up, kill and eat. Well, Peter couldn't do that, because of the dietary restrictions of the Jews. He spoke up and said that he would not do it, because he had never eaten anything that was unclean before.

Then the voice spoke again, and said, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This thing happened three times, and then it was gone. And the scripture tells us that Peter didn't quite know what to make of it all, but he didn't really have time to ponder it, because lo and behold, here came the two servants of Cornelius, knocking at his door.

While they announced the reason for which they had come, the Spirit nudged Peter, saying "these guys are looking for you, go with them, for I have sent them." And so he did.

Remember, this is huge. This is Peter, a Jew, one of the head Jews, if you will, consenting to go to the house of a Gentile! It was not something that was done – the Jews were here, the Gentiles were there, and never the twain should meet.

But Peter heeded the Spirit of God, and crossed that chasm, and when he came face to face with Cornelius, he suddenly realized what the vision of the sheet had meant – that God had created even the Gentiles, God did not call them profane or unclean, but beloved – and God was calling Peter to be the first to welcome them into the fold of the believers, which he does when he speaks those beautiful words that went like this: "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."

One commentator has said that "Acts, chapter 10 is one of the most pivotal passages of scripture in the entire New Testament." For, indeed, things changed radically after this. The doors of the church were opened to all who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Christian movement continued to grow.

Wouldn't it be wonderful for us to be able to say that the church from that day forward opened their arms to all who believed, shared the love of Christ freely, and got along famously? Oh, would that were true, but all of us know that the church today, like the early church, still, too easily succumbs to judgement and exclusion, much as the world does.

Still today, the church sometimes puts up walls. Some Christians believe that if you don't speak in tongues, you're not really Christian. Churches argue about the meaning of, and the way we receive holy communion. We disagree on who can be ordained, on who has authority, on who is worthy of membership and who isn't. We choose sides over our stances on issues of justice and identity, and dig in our heels, being unwilling to listen or learn from someone different from us.

Sadly, the church at times these days looks not much different than the world which is fraught with division right now. The world seems to have its own ideas of who's in and who's out – Democrats fight against Republicans, the have's look down on the have not's, even in the midst of this pandemic we're judging each other based on what we believe, and how we act; and most sadly of all, we've seen the ugly reality of rampant racism in our midst, as evidenced by the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis this week. Still today, as in days of old, people put up walls between themselves and other children of God.

Oh, that the world, oh, that we, could learn from Cornelius and Peter, who listened when God led them to do something different – reach out to someone on the other side. Oh, that we, like those two men, would have the courage to look at things in a different way; to think of ways to build bridges instead of build walls, to focus on the things we have in common rather than the things which tear us apart.

I think that's why I enjoy being a part of GEMA so much – the Greater Elkton Ministerial Association. In some ways, our churches couldn't be any more different. In some of the other churches, I couldn't be ordained or even be in a position of leadership. In some of the other churches, none of us from our church would be welcomed to receive holy communion. In some of the other churches, we wouldn't necessarily be comfortable with their form of worship, nor would they be comfortable with ours. Yet, we are drawn together by the Spirit and our mutual faith in Jesus Christ. And that is enough. We work together in wonderful ways even though we're different in so many ways, because the Spirit draws us together in Christ.

And you want to know something interesting? Our beginnings as a group of pastors in GEMA began around a lunch table, much as Peter's first steps into that new future began when he invited those two visitors from Cornelius to stay and lodge with him. It was through an act of hospitality that the doors began to be opened and change began to come

The Spirit of God that blew across the church on the Day of Pentecost still blows across the church today, in spite of, or perhaps because of the way we separate and divide ourselves. And just as the Spirit brought a new thing into being then, so too might the Spirit be doing that now.

For in the midst of this dreadful pandemic, even now, people are coming to Christ who never showed any interest before. While we bemoan the fact that we can't worship together in person right now, there are so many others who are drawing closer to Christ precisely because of the way we are worshiping right now – in worship yes, but in our individual homes.

For some, coming into a church building is a scary thing, but having the church come to them at home in a welcome relief – and they're coming. You know, before the pandemic, we probably had forty or fifty people view our services online (that's in addition to around 250 worshipping in the church). Now, these last eleven Sundays, we've had hundreds and hundreds of worshipers on line every week. On Easter, we had 725, and most Sundays we're in at least the 300's. You see, God's Spirit is working wonders even in the midst of the struggles of these quarantined days.

Friends, who knows what God will yet do? Who knows what kind of church will emerge when the pandemic comes to an end? All we can do is be faithful to our calling to be disciples of Christ who open our arms to all people, instead of folding them up against those who are different from us; who open our arms to include all of God's children, instead of holding up our hands to keep people in their place; and most of all, people who open our eyes not just to see the ways things are, but to dream with God about the way they could be, and then work through the power of the Holy Spirit to help make it happen.

May the Spirit of God who stirred things up on the Day of Pentecost, and in the lives of two men named Cornelius and Peter, stir things up in us and all of God's people this day and all the days ahead, that each of us might help to make the world more nearly what God would have it be. May it be so.

Amen.