

5.9.21 Er6 The Others are Welcomed

- We carry around in our heads and in our hearts mental images, profiles, and stereotypes of what we anticipate or expect other people to be like
 - So for instance, take the cars that people drive
 - If we see someone drive by in a gas-sipping hybrid like a Prius, we might think that they care about the environment, gas prices, global warming, and that they are “tree huggers” – so that they probably have somewhat liberal view of the world
 - On the other hand, if someone drives by in a pickup truck, we might see that it is a work truck, or the vehicle to haul or tow four wheelers or a trailer, or maybe it’s a truck that’s used for hunting or off-roading – and depending on the bumper stickers often plastered on it, that person’s view of the world may be more conservative
 - But these mental images, these profiles, these stereotypes of what other people are like very often miss the mark
 - Some months ago, within a few days I saw two vehicles that shattered the neat categories and expectations that are in my head – I saw a Toyota Prius with a firearm sticker on its bumper, and I saw a big wheeled pick-up belching exhaust with a peace sticker on its tailgate
- Other people are often far more complicated than the mental images and stereotypes that we carry in our heads. And we who are gathered here are more complicated than how we dress or what we drive. And you and I individually are more complicated than most people with whom we worship even know.
- And that’s at least part of what is at stake in our first lesson for today, a reading from the Acts of the Apostles
 - A Roman Centurion – just like there are 100 CENTS in a dollar, a CENTURIAN commanded 100 men
 - He was a Roman officer in the emperor’s army
 - So to a Jew and early Christian like Peter, just the very image of a centurion evoked the profile of an occupier and oppressor
 - For almost 100 years the Roman army had occupied Jerusalem and its countryside, and unknown to people like Peter, in about 35 years in the future, the Roman army

would put down a Jewish revolt and utterly loot and destroy Jerusalem and its temple

- A centurion, a Roman oppressor, a man who had unjust power and who represented a conquering country – but the Centurion named Cornelius shattered the stereotype with his life
- Yes, he commanded 100 Romans, however Cornelius loved not the Roman gods – instead he and his whole household loved and worshiped the Jewish God, and he generously gave money to the poor
- AND THEN GOD WENT TO WORK. Last week we heard that God had an agenda to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ “in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth [Acts. 1:8],” including welcoming a powerful, Ethiopian who was eunuch – like last week, this week we hear how God pushed and prodded early Christian leaders like Peter to move beyond his close-knit circle to bear witness to and welcome into the Christian faith someone who was complicated, and unexpected, and not at all like him
 - In a vision God gave Cornelius Peter’s name and address, and told this Roman centurion to send messengers to Peter asking him to come
 - Meanwhile in another vision, God assured Peter that although he had been keeping and eating Kosher his whole life in accordance to the law of Moses, that soon he would be entering into the world of Gentiles – that is, the people who did not know and keep the law of Moses
 - Then the Holy Spirit of God gave Peter a shove, telling him that three men were waiting for him, and that he was to go with them
 - And those messengers said, “Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say. [Acts 10:22]”
 - So Peter went with them to Cornelius’ house, and there he found the centurion who had gathered his family and friends, eagerly waiting, hungrily waiting, and excitedly waiting for what Peter had to say

- And Peter simply preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ to these OTHER people – these people who broke the stereotypes of Roman warriors and Gentile oppressors – Peter preached, starting with God’s welcoming and inclusive love: “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. [10:34-35]”
- And then beginning with Jesus’ baptism, Peter told them how the Spirit and power of God dwelled in Jesus, how he healed people and freed them from the power of the devil, how he was put to death, how he was raised from the dead, and how they had seen him and had been commanded by him to be his witnesses to preach the peace of Jesus Christ because he is Lord of all
- Then the Holy Spirit filled everyone in the room, EVEN these Gentile Romans, and Peter commanded that they be baptized into Christ, and they became part of the early church of believers
- OTHER people may be different from us, but in fact WE ARE ALL UNIQUE. People are complicated. And we profile and stereotype each other, and we shatter each other’s preconceived expectations
- But God welcomes both us and them, because “God shows no partiality... and Jesus Christ, crucified and raised, is Lord of all.”
- And now almost 2000 years later, God continues to push and prod the whole church including us, to be witnesses not only where we are comfortable, but also to be witnesses in places we never expected to go, and to people we never dreamed we would meet... because God’s dream is to spread the saving work of Jesus Christ to the very ends of the earth.