

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
"Peter's Vision"

Scripture: Acts 10:1-17, 34-48

Opening Hymn: We praise you, O God 425

Closing Hymn: Go ye, go ye, into the world 755

Children's Hymn: Lord, listen to your children praying 449

Choruses: Spirit, Spirit of gentleness 399 (selected refrains)

Rev. Steve Filyk

May 12, 2018

There are a couple times a year
that the casual and the curious
consider coming through church doors:
Christmas and Easter.

This past Easter we did our best to encourage them.

We put up posters in the church.

We put an ad in the newspaper and on Facebook.

We printed invitations to be shared with family and friends.

Then we blanketed the neighborhood with all the remaining invitations.

That's right—I hired a young man to go door-to-door

And deliver invitations to the homes in all the blocks

Adjacent to our church.

Altogether this was not a bad outreach strategy.

In line with Jesus' parable of the Sower

We were flinging seeds indiscriminately in every direction.

This is one way to evangelise.

But it isn't the method of evangelism employed in today's Gospel story.
Today's lesson describes a more targeted and specific approach
Less like the man blanketing the neighborhood with flyers.
More like the courier who is looking for a specific address.

Let me remind you of the story.

A gentile named Cornelius has a vision
Where an angel directs him to send for a stranger named Peter.
Cornelius obediently sends some servants to fetch him.

The next day Peter also has a vision, more symbolic in nature
Where he is encouraged to eat 'unclean' food.
This is followed by direction to go with those servants
Who have been sent for him.

Peter follows these instructions.

When Peter enters Cornelius' home
Cornelius tells Peter about his vision
And asks Peter to share God's message.

Hearing Cornelius' vision
And knowing his own,
Peter realises what God is saying to him.

Peter understands that those food rules
Those cultural understandings
that once kept Jews and Gentiles separated
Are no longer applicable:

God wants Peter to share with Cornelius,
A gentile, the Good News about Jesus.

So Peter preaches to Cornelius and his household.
Peter proclaims Jesus as Lord
and speaks about the gift of forgiveness.

And before his sermon is finished the Holy Spirit falls upon his listeners.
Realising that they have received the same gift
the disciples received at Pentecost,
Peter has them baptised.

Quite the story.

The Holy Spirit sets up an encounter
between two very different people
So that the Gospel might cross cultural barriers.

In the New Testament it serves to show us
That the Gospel of Jesus is a universal message:
All people, not just Jews, are called to accept and follow Christ.

But more than just teaching us about the universality
Of the Gospel message,
it also teaches us about God's work in the world.

And it is this work that I want to focus on this morning.
I think there are at least three specific lessons
About God's work that we can learn from this text.

The first lesson is that God is at work in the lives of non-Christians.
God is at work in the lives of non-Christians.

This is something we often discount.
We speak of having a relationship with God
Through Jesus Christ.

This is correct.

We have a healed relationship with God and others
Because of the forgiveness that we have received
Through Jesus Christ.

Praise God.

But this can leave us thinking that those who haven't excepted Jesus
Have no connection with God,
or no understanding of spiritual things.

This isn't true.

In today's lesson we are introduced to a man, Cornelius,
Who is called "devout and God-fearing".

While the Good News of Jesus had yet to be explained to him,
We are told that his prayers and his offerings
Have been received by God.

Cornelius feared God:
he opened his heart to God will
And his hands to God's concerns.

Maybe the same thing could be said about
Some of the non-Christians we know.

In an 2016 Angus Reid report entitled “Prayer: Alive and Well in Canada”
It is noted that:

“42 per cent of Canadians are involved in at least one
prayer related activity, once each week.
An additional 44 per cent say they engage
in some prayer activity each month.”

AND

“Canadians pray for a variety of reasons,
but the most common ones are to thank God (71%)
and to ask for help (70%).”ⁱ

Kinda sounds like the prayers we say here each Sunday:
“Help me God! Thank you God!”

What the poll tells us is that like Cornelius,
many Canadians are praying to God.
What Scripture tells us is that
God is listening to the prayers of those
Who don’t know Jesus.

God is working in the lives of those who haven’t accepted Christ.

We don’t bring God into the room when we mingle with non-Christians.
God is already active with these people in these places.

Which leads to the second point.

God wants these non-Christians to hear the Good News about Jesus.

Some people can't acknowledge that non-Christians
Have any valid faith life.

But others seem to think that the faith life of non-Christians
Is satisfactory and complete.

That is: 'I am a Christian.

My best friend is a Buddhist.

I don't have any concerns about that.

We just have different understandings of God.'

This attitude may help you fit into a culture

That tells us to keep silent about our religious beliefs.

But it is certainly out of step with the heart of God.

Our Gospel lesson reveals that God is busy working

To help those who are religious (but don't know Jesus)

To be introduced to the one Peter describes as "Lord of all" and
"the judge of the living and the dead"

Why?

So that they too might receive the promise of Scripture

That "everyone who believes in him

receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

In recent years I've heard more and more people telling stories
About God revealing Jesus to people in the Muslim world,
A world that tends to be very closed to the Gospel.

I came across one story
About a family "on a boat with other migrants
traveling from Turkey to Athens.

On the way they lost their 7-year-old daughter into the water.
Everyone in the crowded boat
was looking for her but couldn't find her.

Suddenly, she appeared on the other side of the boat,
saying over and over,
"A man who walked on the water took me
and brought me to the other side of the boat."

The parents dismissed her words as silly.

Upon arriving on the island of Lesbos,
they met a Christian who made a fire and offered to talk to them.
That day, without knowing what happened,
he asked if they would like to know about a God
who walked on water.

They started crying...

They asked him, "Who are you?" to which he replied, "I'm a Christian."
They said, "What do you mean 'walk on the water'?"
He opened the Bible and read the story of Jesus
walking on the water.

They continued crying. “Our daughter fell off the boat,” they explained.
“We thought she was crazy because she was dry on the other side.
We didn’t understand it. But she kept saying,
‘It was a man who walked on the water
that took me to the other side.’”ⁱⁱ

Today’s lesson reminds us that God is at work in the lives of non-believers
God wants people of all faiths and religions to know about Jesus.

And today’s lesson also makes clear that it is through prayer
That we become attuned to God’s plans
and useful for God’s purposes.

As I was reading through today’s passage
I stopped at the notation that Cornelius had a vision
At 3pm.

I mean, that’s a strange detail.
What’s so significant about 3pm.

When I read the whole story
(you’ve heard an abbreviated account this morning)
The significance of this detail was made clear.

3pm was prayer time for Cornelius.

Cornelius has a vision when he is praying.
And Peter also has a vision when he is spending time in prayer.

Now God doesn't have to wait for us to calm down our hearts
And open our minds to us.
God can knock us off our feet,
Like he did to Saul.

But prayer positions us to be aware and receptive to what God is doing.

It's funny but we don't always give prayer that much priority.
I'm guilty of this.

Prayer is often thrown in at the end of a discussion or a meeting
To ask God's blessing on what we have already decided
Rather than to invite God
to lead us into the work God is already doing.

In his book *Faithful Presence*:

Seven Disciplines that Shape the Church for Mission

The author David Fitch recounts being challenged
by a seminary student
Who met sat in with Fitch
at church leadership meetings.

Rather than just jump into a meeting after a perfunctory prayer,
He challenged Fitch to "slow everything down and take some time
To lead everyone into the presence of Christ."

Fitch responded by asking that student
to open the next meeting in prayer.
He describes what happened:

“We spent a few minutes in silence before God.
We took a few deep breaths.
We prayed to submit all things
into God’s presence, care, and enabling.

[Soon Fitch] realised that something special was happening...
[They] were posturing [themselves] before the Ruler of the universe.
[They] were letting go of [their] egos, agendas, personal issues,
if only for the next hour or two.

[They] were opening up space for God to work.”ⁱⁱⁱ

PAUSE

For a long time Session has been talking about mission.
I think we all realise that we need
A mission in that we can rally around as a community.

I think we realise that as a church
We need to visibly demonstrate the love of Jesus to our neighbors
And to vocally declare that Jesus is Lord.

But were not really sure how we might do this...

Considering today’s lesson, we might conclude
That God is already at work in the neighborhood,
That God wants us to make Jesus’ name know
among the people,
And that prayer will help us discern
where God is inviting us to share in this work.

In the next month I'm going to be leading a prayer walk
through the neighborhood.

We will explore the community around us,
Ask God to bless it,
And look for the ways in which God is already at work.

I hope you might feel a tug in your own Spirit
to spend some time listening,
Listening to where God is calling each of us,
Where God is calling St. Andrew's
To be God's ambassadors and witnesses
and co-workers in the world.

Amen.

ⁱ "Prayer: Alive and well in Canada" May 8, 2016 Angus Reid Institute <http://angusreid.org/prayer-in-canada/>

ⁱⁱ Darren Carlson "When Muslims Dream of Jesus" May 31, 2018 <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/muslims-dream-jesus/>

ⁱⁱⁱ David E. Fitch *Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines that Shape the Church for Mission* 167