We’ve been considering one of the most important turning points in the history of the Christian church as recorded in Acts 10. It is the moment when the Gospel of Jesus Christ transcends Jewish circles and we discover that God loves all people and shows no partiality regardless of gender, nationality, ethnicity, or any other distinction. If you recall, last week we covered the Apostle Peter’s short sermon to the Roman Centurion Cornelius and his household in the city of Caesarea, and today we will return to the story to see what happens when these Gentiles, these non-Jews, hear the Gospel for the first time. So please stand, and let’s read Acts 10:44-11:18.

Peter has just proclaimed Jesus Christ to be the one appointed by God to be the judge of the living and the dead, even as Jesus provides forgiveness of sins for all who believe in His name. And then something very dramatic happens.

In vs. 44 we read, “While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God.”

First of all, notice that Peter is interrupted. He’s still talking…he has more to say…his sermon still has a few more pages left. He hasn’t told any entertaining stories, no jokes…he hasn’t even provided any interesting illustrations yet. Surely Peter would have finished with a stirring call to make a decision, to repent, believe and be baptized. But even before Peter can extend an altar call, he is interrupted.

Quite suddenly and unexpectedly, a mighty wind blows through the house. It is Pentecost all over again, except this time, those who are speaking in tongues and extolling God are not the disciples of Jesus…they’re not even good, God-fearing Jews. This time, those who are receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit are Romans…servants, soldiers, men and women, perhaps even children. Luke writes that those believers from among the circumcised were amazed! What does that mean? It means that the men who accompanied Peter from Joppa, Jesus followers who, like Peter himself, were Jews by birth, are absolutely shocked that the Holy Spirit has descended upon the very group of people they were culturally conditioned to hate.

Imagine if you were surrounded by soldiers from ISIS. And imagine that these soldiers had recently overtaken your city, killed your family members, burned your church to the ground, and tortured your fellow church members by hanging them on crosses. What kinds of feelings would
you have for such people? How much of a desire would you have in your heart for these people…these violent, blasphemous, vicious, heartless, merciless murderers to be saved and brought into the Kingdom of Heaven? Imagine if these ISIS soldiers came into your church and heard the Gospel, and all of the sudden they began to manifest the signs and wonders of the Holy Spirit!

That’s very much what this situation is comparable to that we now read about in Acts 10. Granted, this particular Roman centurion has previously demonstrated a fear of God and generosity to the people, but that would not have mattered much to those from the circumcision party. For first century Jews, all Romans, all non-Jews, all the detestable Gentiles could be summed up with one word: *goyim*, meaning “the nations,” and that word was said with spit and disgust.

You must appreciate that in the Jewish traditions surrounding the first century, these men would have been raised on the teachings of texts such as Jubilees 22.16 which taught, “Separate thyself from the nations (the goyim), and eat not with them: and do not according to their works, and become not their associate; for their works are unclean, and all their ways are a pollution and an abomination and uncleanness.” Now, to be clear, that teaching was NOT part of the Bible, but that kind of teaching was common among the Rabbis, the Pharisees and the Jewish teachers, and that’s the kind of rhetoric these men were raised with. In their minds, there was no hope for the Gentiles apart from them repenting, cleansing themselves in the sacred pools, and becoming Jews.

But now, amazingly…as the Gospel of Jesus Christ is being proclaimed to their listening ears, these Gentiles are indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God. There has been no ritual cleansing, no circumcision, no conversion to Judaism, no obvious signs of repentance…and yet there is no mistaking the signs. These Romans now speak in tongues they could not possibly have known, and they cry out in praise and adoration of God and His Son Jesus Christ. Those from among the circumcised are literally left speechless.

Peter is the first to recover, and he cries out in vs. 47, “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” Peter recognizes what has happened…those who were formerly deemed unclean, God has now made clean. The Gentiles have received the SAME Holy Spirit as the Jews because they have believed in the same Gospel of Jesus Christ. God has shown no partiality, and Peter understands that baptism is now appropriate as a sign and seal that these men and women, these Romans…even the soldiers…even the Gentile children…are brothers and sisters in Christ. Luke concludes the story by recording that Peter orders his fellow Christian brothers from Joppa to baptize Cornelius and his household in the name of Jesus Christ, and then he remains there in Caesarea for several days to equip the new believers.
The power of this story cannot be overstated. God acted…God initiated…God chose to save Gentiles, and He made sure He had seven Christian witnesses there to see it take place. Note that Peter can take no credit here whatsoever. Peter did not lay hands on the Gentiles; Peter did not convince them with his excellent preaching and apologetics; Peter did not lead them to be baptized in order to receive the Holy Spirit…Peter was simply there to bear witness and to be a witness to God’s divine, sovereign election of this Gentile man and his household.

Notice that all of the people who heard the LOGOS…the Word as presented by Peter, were filled with the Holy Spirit. It wasn’t just Cornelius…it wasn’t just his family…it was also extended relatives and close friends of Cornelius. There may have been as many as 30-60 people there that day…they all were chosen by God…all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Listen: God loves people, and there is no group of people anywhere in the world that He loves more or that He loves less. God loves people…He loves His creation…He loves those who bear His image…all of them. The next time you walk through an airport, or you watch the news, or you travel abroad…look carefully at every person you see, and say to yourself, “God loves him. God loves her. God loves them.” Try it…you will be overwhelmed in 5 minutes. And here’s why: we could never love that many people! We could never love so many weird people! We could never love so many scary people! We could never love so many broken, stinky, foreign, difficult, angry, and combative people. But make no mistake: God loves them all…He thinks about them all…He knows their names; He knows how many hairs are on their heads; He absolutely, positively, constantly, and without exception LOVES every human being. And He loves them every bit as much as He loves you…and He loves you every bit as much as He loves them. Church…are we reflecting the way God loves the world in the way that we love the world in HIS NAME?

Dr. Kent Hughes tells a story that illustrates my question. He writes:

The great Hindu leader, Mahatma Gandhi, shares in his autobiography that in his student days in England he was deeply touched by reading the Gospels and seriously considered becoming a convert to Christianity, which seemed to offer a real solution to the castes system that divided the people of India. One Sunday he attended church services and decided to ask the minister for enlightenment on salvation and other doctrines. But when Gandhi entered the sanctuary, the ushers refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go elsewhere to worship with his own people. He left and never came back. “If Christians have caste differences also,” he said to himself, “I might as well remain a Hindu!”

Do you have a “caste system” as an American Christian? Do we have a caste system as a church? Are there certain people we would rather not come through our doors? Are there certain kinds of people that we would prefer go and worship with their own kind?

Sadly, the history of Christianity is full of stories not unlike that of Gandhi’s experience that day in a church service. And it’s been that way from the beginning…

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Look at what comes next in beginning in Acts 11:1 and following:
Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

Some people simply don’t get it. Instead of celebrating that an entire household of some 30-60 people had found salvation in Christ, these men of the circumcision party berate Peter for eating dinner at the table of the Gentiles.

Notice, however, that Peter does not get offended, nor does he get angry. After all, he would have had the same attitude not long ago had it not been for his recent vision from the Lord and the fact that he saw with his own eyes how the Holy Spirit had descended upon the Gentiles when they heard the Gospel.

So beginning with vs. 4, Peter tells the whole story over again to the believers in Jerusalem. He tells of his vision, how the voice from heaven told him “What God has made clean, do not call common.” He tells them about his journey with the men from Caesarea along with six other men from Joppa who now stand beside him as he makes his defense.

Let’s pick up the story beginning in vs. 15. Peter says:
As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?

OK…there’s a lot here. First, on a completely unrelated topic, and at the risk of getting shot, I want to address one of the hardest questions that I get asked almost weekly. Quite often people ask me, “How do I know if God is speaking to me or if that is just my own voice in my head?” That is a really good and difficult question, and my short answer is…I wrestle with that too. In other words, I think we are all capable of convincing ourselves that “God said” something when in fact it may have been the tacos we had for lunch!

However, there is no question that God does speak to us…He moves us, prompts us, calls us, convicts us…and so we must wrestle with how we can hear and know God’s voice. First I would say this: when God speaks to us, it is far easier to recognize His voice when the instruction is to do that thing we really DON’T want to do rather than doing the thing we really DO want to do! In other words, it’s easier to recognize the voice of God when He disagrees with us in comparison to those rare occasions when God may actually agree with us!
For example: in 2008, when Christy and I were praying about God’s will regarding which job offer we should take, it came down to two choices: the first would leave us close to family in a warm climate among lots of people we knew and loved in an area of the country we knew and loved. The second choice was to come to Kansas City…which we both had to look up on a map, where it was very cold (at the time), we knew nobody, and where we would be 16 hours away from our closest family member. When the conviction came that we were to join up with Colonial in Kansas City, we knew it was God, because it would not have been our first choice to move so far away from our families.

Peter’s story is kind of like that. It would have never been Peter’s idea to go hang out with Roman soldiers and preach the gospel to them and their families. That was simply not a “Peter” originated idea. The whole concept would have been repulsive to him. But then Peter “hears from the Lord.” We know that vision was not due to tacos because shortly after the vision ended, people arrived who helped make sense of the vision, and then Peter’s experience with Cornelius and his family confirmed the truth and the origin of the vision.

Finally, Peter reflects biblically upon the vision and his experience. In vs. 16 he says, “And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, “John baptized you with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” The Word of God confirmed his experience, and his experience confirmed the vision, which helped him to be certain that his vision was from God.

So how do we recognize the voice of God? 1) Be suspect if God agrees with what you want…2) If you believe God said it, but whatever “it” is does not come to pass, then God didn’t say it! Experience should confirm the vision…if not, it’s likely God didn’t say it; 3) a vision or an experience with God will never contradict His own word. We should always test what we believe God is saying to us by what God has already said to us! God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, right? He won’t contradict himself.

OK…back to the text. Peter has made his case, and asked the question that even now his listeners must also ask: whom am I to stand in the way of God? Those from the circumcised party have absorbed Peter’s testimony and that of the six men from Joppa, and Luke reports that the prejudiced Jesus followers “fell silent.” They are stunned…they are pensive…they are processing…and then they respond by glorifying God saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

What an incredible moment that was! What a breakthrough! What an insight! What a change of heart! I love this part of the story for a few reasons. First, it gives me hope for us Christians who were raised with entrenched prejudices. Old habits are hard to break. Many people from very racist, prejudiced backgrounds have sincere conversion experiences, become followers of Jesus, but then slip back into old patterns of thinking and behaving. I know that’s wrong, and I know
it’s easy to judge people for being racist and prejudiced (especially Christians), until someone points out that same tendency in me—or in you. Truth be known, we all have a touch of prejudice in us—it’s almost impossible not to. I didn’t realize how much prejudice I had in me until I began to travel the world. As began to visit different countries and encounter different people groups, I had to admit that I had issues with Russians and Muslims, largely because I had been taught to fear Russians and Muslims for most of my life. I was not taught to hate or fear black people, so that has never been an issue for me. Russians and Muslims…those were the people at the bottom of my “caste system.” I have discovered that I have others in my caste system as well: I don’t trust a lot of used car salesmen…I can have a very poor attitude towards “liberals” and atheists. And I inevitably avoid anyone who makes me feel stupid.

Turns out I have a caste system…I do. And I hate that part of me. I can honestly say, however, that my caste system is getting smaller…Jesus has given me opportunity to meet and know many people from my “caste system” who changed my mind about Russians and Muslims and Liberals and atheists and used car salesmen and people who are just that much smarter than I am. Turns out Jesus loves all of those people, and slowly but surely I’m learning to love all of those people as well…but I can tell you that didn’t happen overnight for me, and it won’t likely happen overnight for you—or for those who place you in their “caste system.” So…if you’re new to Christianity and you’ve been disillusioned by the behavior and racist attitudes of some of your new brothers and sisters in the church…I understand, but please know that we are not all sanctified immediately from former attitudes and behaviors. That takes time. That doesn’t make those attitudes and behaviors OK…they’re not OK…and we should hold each other accountable for repentance and make every effort to lay down our caste system. But let’s be careful how hard we throw stones at other believers…we’re all prejudiced, and we’re all a work in progress.

The main point of the text here is this: we are NEVER justified in our racism or prejudice against other people groups, nations, or individuals. Jesus has made a way for all. God has granted repentance that leads to life for ALL PEOPLE! The Word of God is true and it is clear: in Christ there is no Jew, no Gentile, no Jayhawks, no Tigers…no distinction. God loves them all, Jesus died for sinners, and we are ALL sinners. There are no CASTE systems allowed in Christianity…we must commit ourselves to lay them down. And that requires the power of God…it’s very hard to do any other way.

Let me close with a reflection on those final words: God has granted repentance that leads to life. Did you hear how repentance is described as a gift? God grants repentance…which means it is a gift to see your sin and to be brokenhearted over it. It is a gift to weep as we gaze upon Jesus Christ crucified and see there the blameless Lamb of God who suffered and died the death we deserve that we might receive forgiveness of sins which we certainly DO NOT deserve. It’s a gift from God to be able to repent, and that gift is for all people. It is the gift of repentance that leads to LIFE! Life awaits all who will repent…a life of grace, healing, purpose, humility, and

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joy on this earth, and eternal life when we breathe our last. Will you receive the gift that God has granted you? Will you repent and believe? Will you call upon the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins? And will you extend that gift, that invitation to all people as God has called us? Will you lay down your caste system and love the world as God loves the world?

Let us repent…and let us pray.