

May 19, 2019
Easter 5 c

Today's first lesson is quite a mix. It's about visions, stranger danger, how enemies can become friends, and a spiritual war to save humanity. It's also about how the early church grew faster than it could be killed off. Just maybe, this lesson offers some clues about how today's church can become more alive.

We just heard that Peter had baptized the household of Cornelius, and they formed the core of a new congregation. Cornelius was a Roman soldier. That's why church leaders criticized Peter. He broke the rules just by eating with this Gentile.

Israel's Messiah had been expected to conquer the Romans, not to have his disciples welcome them as equals under the rule of God. So, Peter had to explain why he was buddy-buddy with an officer in the same Roman army that had crucified Jesus.

The most important thing in Peter's reply was that God himself sent him to Cornelius. This outreach was not Peter's clever strategy for increasing market share in an underserved demographic. Rather, it was God acting to change Peter's mind.

Both Peter and Cornelius were men who frequently tuned in to God. That's the first clue to a spiritually alive church. Cornelius prayed often to the God of Israel, and he made generous gifts. In today's lesson, a vision from God came to Peter during his prayers.

Then both men actually did what God told them to do. Cornelius sent for Peter, and Peter went to Cornelius and preached the Gospel. Then these Gentiles received the Holy Spirit. They believed and were baptized. In God's eyes, they

became full members of the church; and some other church members needed to open their eyes to the new thing that God was doing.

This event was all about God's grace received through faith. Cornelius was a Roman soldier, a Gentile, a whatever. God decided that these facts would no longer exclude people like Cornelius from his people. But neither would these facts, by themselves, give Cornelius an entitlement to be included either. The point was that things like biology and nationality were beside the point, one way or the other.

Rather, what really mattered were God's call and the gift of faith that accepted this call. As a new Christian, Cornelius could take his faith into the rest of his life as a soldier, a Roman, a whatever. His faith in Christ involved being baptized, changing his ways, and being obedient to his savior. That call and that faith are what united the Jews and Gentiles who followed Jesus.

So, let's be very clear about something. It's not that God led the church to approve of pagan ways in order to include more pagans. Rather, God led the church to seek and welcome Gentiles who would give up pagan ways and follow the ways of Christ.

So, in this story, inclusivity and growth were based on spirituality, based on grace, faith, and repentance. That's another clue to church renewal.

So, what was God thinking? I have a few guesses.

First of all, Jesus came to save all people everywhere, regardless of race, nationality, gender, or whatever. Choosing Cornelius demonstrated that point.

In addition to this, a Roman soldier like Cornelius might perceive a very practical side to God's actions. Rome had great success by turning conquered enemies into

allies. In his spiritual war to save humanity, could God have been doing the same kind of thing when he chose a Roman soldier, forgave him, and called him to repent?

Forgiveness involves God accepting us as his people even with all our rebellious acts of disobedience. Repentance involves us sinners turning our allegiance to God's side, obeying him as best we can.

After Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, there were changes in God's tactics. Because the promises that God had made to Israel were still valid, the Messiah called Israel to follow him. This Messiah now offered these same promises and this same call to the whole world. So, we Gentiles could belong to God's people, as full brothers and sisters with the children of Abraham.

This story shows how God's love and God's wisdom combined to bring people to his side of a spiritual war to save humanity. For the church is called to be far more than just a social club that's nice enough to include everybody in our fun.

Rather, the church is called primarily to be our Lord's special forces against the evil in this world. We're called to proclaim the Gospel to all people and to invite them to repent and join God's mission, regardless of our many differences in race, nationality, politics, or class. We're called to live what we proclaim. That's another key to a spiritually alive church.

In our age, God's primary weapons against evil include his love for us and the divine love that he channels through us. As Christ commanded us in today's Gospel, we're called to practice this love toward each other in the church, especially

when we have our differences. Christ also calls us to act in love toward others outside the church, no matter how different they may be.

So, we're called to invite people who are as different from us as Cornelius was from Peter, to welcome them as fellow sinners who are forgiven, as fellow travelers on a life-long road of repentance. We're called to welcome them into God's fight against all the forces of evil and death.

Although we have different gifts, different ways of doing things, and different opinions about so much, our Lord brings us together to serve him above all else. Uniting to serve Christ is yet another key to a vital church.

The story of Cornelius is just the beginning. Right now, we're in the middle. The end of this story? That's in today's second lesson.

The power of God's love shall establish a new heaven and a new earth where God shall wipe every tear from our eyes, where death shall be no more, where all things are made new, and the things that divide us now shall be overcome by the Savior whose love unites us.

May the Lord who loves us so much inspire our love for him and for others, so that his new heaven and new earth may come more and more each day through us.

Amen

Pastor Carl A. Jensen, retired