

Focus: The Holy Spirit chooses who belongs.

One of my friends in the area is the Rev. Maria Rutland who is a Presbyterian pastor. She recently shared with our group of ministers the story of her friend Howard who a few decades ago enrolled at the Gammon School of Theology at Atlanta University Complex. Howard was second career, seeking ordination in North Georgia Conference of the Presbyterian Church-USA in 1970. He chose Gammon over Candler, wishing to understand ministry from an African American perspective. His first day was awkward! As an older white man, he was immediately aware that his presence caused his classmates to drop their jaws and cease their conversations! After his morning classes, Howard retreated to the student lounge to eat lunch and read rather than go to the dining hall. As he entered, the students in the lounge fell silent and looked away. He slouched into a chair, trying to become invisible, wondering if he had made a mistake by choosing Gammon.

About 10 minutes later, the dean of the seminary appeared in the doorway. He looked around the lounge, and spotted Howard. He looked Howard in the eye, and asked loudly: “Mr. Griffin, who do you think you are, coming here to learn the art of ministry?” Howard was speechless! Without skipping a beat, the dean then turned to another student and asked, “And you, Mr. Andrews, who do you think you are to come here to learn the art of ministry?” He did this to several students, all of whom were now terrified and intimidated. Then the dean broke out into a beautiful smile and said, “You are all God’s children, and by the grace of Christ you are here to learn how to minister. Welcome to Gammon!” He hugged them all and shook their hands. And Howard was accepted from that point forward.

“You did not choose me, but I chose you.” That’s what Jesus says in the Gospel of John.

It’s what Peter found out. Poor Peter. They say there are two ways to learn things: the easy way and the hard way. And it always seems like Peter has to learn the hard way.

This week he is responding to a house-call from a man named Cornelius. Last week, I quoted biblical scholars Will Willimon who said Christians who are obedient to the Holy Spirit will find ourselves in the oddest situations with the strangest sorts of people. And boy is that the truth!

The first thing to know about Cornelius is he is a God-fearer. We talked about those people briefly last week; not Jewish, but do believe in the God of Israel. Well he’s praying, and God says that his prayer has been heard; go send for a man named Peter. Well, he does, and it’s immediately clear that the *only* thing Cornelius and Peter have in common is their faith in God!

Start with this: Cornelius is a Gentile. And he’s not just like a Gentile-Lite, he and his whole family are Gentile XL. Cornelius is a centurion—or a military officer—for the Roman army. What’s the big deal? Well, the Roman army are the same ones who are occupying Peter’s homeland and keeping them under foreign rule and foreign taxes. In America, we haven’t been militarily occupied in 250 years, so let me explain what that means with a simple question: Who executed Jesus? Who picked him up, nailed him to the cross, mocked him, and watched him until he died and then guarded the tomb? Roman soldiers! Roman soldiers just like Cornelius; heck he may have been there himself! So Peter’s not exactly eager when he gets this house-call. He may be thinking, “This is the same type of guy who killed my friend.” He may be thinking,

“I wonder what he’s going to do to me.” (Remember that Peter’s already annoyed a lot of powerful people.) And at the very least, we know he’s thinking—because he tells Cornelius straight-out earlier in the chapter—“You yourselves know that it is unlawful [according to the Torah] for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile (Acts 10:27).” Peter must be thinking: *Man, what am I even doing **here**?*

The answer, he’s being obedient to the Spirit. The Spirit who had just told him in a vision to follow three men searching for him who have led him right to this super-Gentile Cornelius.

And so Peter preaches, and as he preaches, the Holy Spirit falls on Cornelius and all his household. And these Gentiles Peter never would have talked to before, never would have given a second thought to, start speaking in tongues and glorifying God. And Peter says, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” In other words: is anyone going to get in the way of what God is doing? Please understand: 5 minutes ago, Peter would have raised his hand yes! God is doing something *new*. God is bringing in people who never would have been brought in before, God is bringing together people who would have never been brought together before, God is taking a great, big old chasm, and building a huge bridge. A bridge that is crossed by baptism, by this new thing called the church of every race, origin, ethnicity, background, language, in every tongue glorifying God. And miraculously enough, this man Peter who did not want to, could not legally go to Cornelius’s house, stays several days: eats his Gentile food, gets to know Cornelius’s Gentile family, not as Jews vs. Gentiles, but as neighbors and companions and brothers and sisters in Christ.

This is a pretty darn inspiring story, people. And if it could happen in the first century in Palestine or in 1970 in Atlanta—which seems almost as long ago to me—it can still happen today in our church, town, and country. Some people say it can’t. Some people say that Democrats/Republicans BLM folks/Blue Line folks, and so many other cultural divides can’t be brought into one people. And maybe some of us don’t want it that way. It really is a lot easier to worship with people who already agree with you on politics or on faith or on culture than to try something new. But that’s why it’s Jesus who gets to choose who belongs and not us.

Being faithful for us means letting the Spirit do her work among us. It means being willing to allow ourselves to be surprised by the odd situations we find ourselves in and the strange people we meet and call brothers and sisters. That may be unusual in today’s world; it may not be normal. Faith is not about believing in the normal things. It’s about believing in the God who raises the dead. It’s about believing in the God who can build a bridge between Peter and Cornelius. It’s about believing in the God who gives us his Spirit here and now. Can we be like Peter and take that first step out? This much we do know: we’ll be surprised by where and to whom the Spirit takes us. **Amen.**