

Even on Them

Texts: I John 5:1-6, Acts 10:44-48

Kirkpatrick Memorial Presbyterian Church – May 9, 2021

Rev. Michael F. Atzert

In order to give the correct context for our Scripture lesson for this morning, you have to go all the way back to the beginning of chapter 10 of the book of Acts. With Cornelius. We learn that Cornelius is a devout God-fearing man. And a centurion. A Gentile. Cue the collective gasp from first century Jewish Christianity. God appears to Cornelius in a vision and tells him to send men to Simon Peter and bring him back to Cornelius. Cornelius obeys the Lord in the vision and sends out the two men.

Meanwhile, Peter is praying. And as he is doing this, he becomes almost trancelike and sees the heavens open and all kinds of animals – animals that were not acceptable in the Jewish faith – come down on what looked like a large sheet. A voice calls to him to kill the animals and eat. But they are unclean. They are impure. Three times Peter objects, and three times the voice tells Peter it is okay. Peter comes out of the trance and does not understand what had just happened. No sooner had this happened that he is told that three men are looking for him – the men that were sent by Cornelius. He greets them and ends up following them back to the home of Cornelius.

When he arrives at the home, he encounters a large group of people. Well, Gentiles. He reminds them that it is a violation of the Jewish law for them to visit or associate. However, Peter remembers the vision and recognizes that God is doing something here. So he stayed, even though it went against everything he believed and held to. Imagine the inner tension Peter must have felt. Sure, he knew this was from God, but it was not as he was accustomed. It went against his beliefs and faith. Peter shares with those gathered the Good News of Jesus Christ.

While he was still speaking, the Holy Spirit comes upon all those who were at Cornelius' house – Jew and Gentile alike. Rick Morley, who is rector at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Basking Ridge gives us this perspective. He writes, "Gentiles in Caesarea Maritima are coming to faith in God in Christ, and the Christians of Jewish descent are "astounded" that the Holy Spirit of God is being given to "even" the Gentiles. In other words, they have no clue. They have no idea what God is doing, what God is capable of, or who God is able to reach. Instead of being open to the infinite possibilities of God they are closed-minded, thinking that the only way to God is a way that looks like the way that they came to God.

As if God can't be reached by other routes. As if their understanding of God is the only right way. The only possible way. Of course, this is the quintessential struggle in the New Testament Church between Jewish and Gentile Christianity. The question, "Can one follow Jesus without also being Jewish," sat over the nascent church like a wet blanket. But, *of course*, this is also the quintessential struggle of the church today" (From Internet. www.rickmorley.com/archives/1585. 05/03/21). How can it be? Even on them?

That person cannot be a Christian because they... Fill in the blank. Democrats cannot receive the Holy Spirit because they... Choose the belief or social issue. Republicans could not possibly have the Holy Spirit because they... Again pick the platform issue. Or outside of politics, which really seems to be the biggest dividing point for our country today, who are your "even on them" people? Is there a list that you keep – whether intentionally or unintentionally? Or is it just even one or two people?

There is no way that they deserve the grace of God or the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. We believe this because of how someone else believes or because they are different from us (in whatever way we deem different). They do not deserve it because he or she is an

awful person. At this point, pick your flaw in someone else, whatever it might be for why they do not deserve God in their lives. Even on them...

“For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, ‘Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.’” What the Jews assembled in that place with Peter were witnessing was legitimate. Peter acknowledged it – even though it was against his perception of what his faith stood for – and affirmed these Gentiles getting baptized.

God spoke and acted through Cornelius. God spoke and acted through Peter. God spoke and acted through the people gathered there – Jews and Gentiles alike. Despite their differences, despite perceived worthiness, despite tradition, despite the “even on them” feelings, God was at work. God saw the bigger picture, and the result for all those assembled was glorious. God knew where this would lead and how Christianity would grow – from Peter and Paul’s time through the Reformation until today – 2021.

Peter may have questioned it because it was uncomfortable and not what he was used to. “We have never done it this way before” was perhaps the battle cry of the early Jewish Christians. And yet, here is Peter affirming his faithfulness to the God of his Messiah, Jesus Christ. All that Peter had witnessed in Jesus up until now was a coming together of God’s perfect, eternal, Divine plan. Peter trusted God – and more people were brought to faith on that day because of that trust. Even on them.

Morley ends the article I read this week with these words, “It’s like when we look out into the world around us, we see just a sliver – just the tiniest wedge of possibilities. But, God sees the whole sky. The whole infinite expanse of the universe brimming with possibilities” (From Internet. 05/03/21). For Peter and Cornelius, it was about the possibilities. What could

happen when they let God in enough so that He could do His thing. How lives could be changed and transformed.

Imagine possibilities of our God in our midst today, even in the times in which we live. The possibilities of our God when we live in grace with those who are on our “even on them” camp. The possibilities of our God when we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. This passage was so beautifully read by a child of God in our church family. The possibilities of God because He is seeing the whole sky – the big picture.

I wish I had the answers to solve the problems of this nation, our state, even the issues within the church. I wish that things could be better – that everything could be back to normal (whatever that might mean). However, I have seen more times than I can count in the midst of all these troubled times that God is among us. God has this. God has a purpose for each one of us – those whom we agree and are in line with and those “even on them” people in our lives. Let us each believe in the possibilities of our God and stay out of God’s way so that He can do His wonderful, beautiful thing. Let us pray...

Gracious God, we thank You that You do indeed see the bigger picture – You see details that are out of our perspective. We pray for those on our “even on them” lists. We pray for those who we struggle with because they are different or we do not understand them. Help us to value and respect all Your children and show love and care to all. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.