

The Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 6, 2018
Text: Acts 10:34-46
"God's Ways"

God's ways are not ours; they are higher than ours. Perhaps none of the apostles knew this better than Peter. He answered Jesus' question about His identity not with his own thoughts or words, but with those given to him by the Holy Spirit. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16) With his next breath, he opposed Jesus to tell Him that He must never die in the way He said He would. Jesus exposed Peter as a sinner who cared for man's ways more than God's. At the last supper, Jesus said that Peter would deny him three times by the next morning, to which Peter earnestly protested, but by morning he wept bitterly because Jesus' words were true. Three days later, Peter rejoiced with his friends to see that Jesus had conquered sin and death for their salvation. Sometime later, when Jesus appeared on the shore of the Galilean Sea, interrupting the disciples' night of fishing, Peter three times reaffirmed his commitment to Christ's calling to feed His sheep. After the ten days of keeping prayerful watch for the Lord's promise of power from on high, on the day of Pentecost, it was Peter who found himself guided by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the meaning of the day and the message of salvation to the crowds in Jerusalem.

And today we meet Peter preaching again on what was a second sort of Pentecost. He was there in response to another revelation that God's plans are higher than ours. Two days earlier, he had been staying with a friend in a city called Joppa, when God gave him a vision. Peter saw a sheet descend from heaven to earth. It was filled with animals forbidden as food by the purity laws of the book of Leviticus. A heavenly voice commanded Peter, who had been hungry waiting for his lunch, to make his meal from one of those beasts. Peter recognized the creatures as being those the law taught him to avoid as food, so he resisted the command to eat. The voice however warned Peter not to call anything common or unclean that God had made clean. The vision came to Peter three times to hammer its point home.

A day or two before this, God had sent His angel to a Roman centurion living in Caesarea, named Cornelius. Though a Gentile, Cornelius was a devout believer in the true God. During prayer, the angel appeared and instructed the centurion to send a delegation to Joppa to find Peter. Those men arrived at the house where Peter was staying just as the apostle's visions were complete. The Holy Spirit told Peter to go with the men who were knocking on his door. They asked him to come with them to Caesarea.

Arriving in Caesarea, Peter and some of his friends found Cornelius' house filled with people waiting to hear the divine message he was to speak. He introduced his sermon with a captivating statement: *"Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."* Until that day, it was unthinkable for Peter and for all the early Christians to imagine non-Jewish people – Gentiles – as recipients of the saving love of God proclaimed in the gospel.

There were two reasons for that. First, the promise of the Christ was known and cherished by Jewish people because it was recorded in their Scriptures. Therefore early

preaching naturally aimed at the faithful heirs of that hope – the Jews in Jerusalem and its surrounding area. With time, resistance to the gospel and to the church grew among the Jews who did believe in Jesus, and they began to persecute the Christians. Many believers were forced to move away from Jerusalem and resettle in Samaria, Galilee and even further north. Their witness to Christ led to more conversions and births of congregations. Some of those converts were Gentiles, like the Samaritans, but most were still Jewish.

The first Christians were slow to preach the gospel to Gentiles because they were in the habit of avoiding them as much as possible. They had learned from their history to distrust, avoid and look down upon the Gentiles. For centuries Gentiles had been their overlords and their godless cultures had overshadowed the faith of the Jewish people. A few centuries before the time of Jesus a group of determined Jews known as the Pharisees arose and opposed the influence of Gentile culture by devising a system of customs and rules aimed at helping Jews to be true to God's laws by remaining separate from Gentiles. Though Jesus had taught His disciples that He had other sheep to call and gather into His flock, even after His resurrection, it seemed to them that there remained an insurmountable wall standing between them as God's people and the rest of humanity.

But then came the thrice repeated vision, the testimony of Cornelius' friends of an angel visitation, and finally the sight of this house filled with expectant God-fearing Gentiles, and Peter was convinced that God was truly doing a new thing in the name of His Son. God meant to knock down the wall between Jew and Gentile. The gospel of Jesus was truly for everyone!

So Peter preached Jesus. He is Lord of all. He was anointed by the Holy Spirit and did good throughout Galilee and Judea by healing and saving people. He was nailed to the tree of the cross for the sake of all those whose first parents ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God raised Him up on the third day, and Jesus appeared to His disciples, and He commanded them to preach that He is both the world's Judge and its Savior.

Through Peter's message, the Holy Spirit came. He fell upon Cornelius' congregation, and He showed His presence among them just as He had years before among those gathered at Pentecost by enabling them to praise God in foreign languages. If God's Spirit accepted these Gentiles, then who was Peter or anyone else to keep God's gifts from them. Peter immediately baptized them all in the name of Jesus.

God does not play favorites. The gospel of Jesus crucified and raised from the dead was for all peoples. The church of Jesus was open to Jews and Gentiles alike. God wants all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Like the early Christians, we fall into the trap of imagining that the wall that divides us from people of other faiths or no faith at all is insurmountable. We see people with moral values radically different than ours, and we doubt whether they can ever be believers in Jesus. We hear people boldly claim that they can live well without Jesus, and it

makes us timid about talking about Him. We forget that God's ways are not ours and that His are the higher.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is still for everyone even though our culture retains little remembrance of it. Humans, regardless of what they believe about themselves, are God's creatures, made in His image but fallen into sin and rebellion against Him. God made us to know Him, trust Him and serve Him in love through our neighbors, and to restore us to that life He sent His Son to come to us as a man. Jesus lived that life before God and people for which we were all meant. He willingly allowed Himself to be rejected, condemned and crucified, even suffering God's wrath for us to atone for the sins of every person. God raised His Son from the dead to declare peace with us, with all of us, regardless of our differences or distinctions. By that message of peace we stand in faith borne of the Holy Spirit, forgiven and saved by God through Christ. God calls us, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to believe that God's message of peace in Jesus is a message for all our neighbors and to tell it to them in love.

Our cultural situation is quite similar to that of Peter's time. As the apostle preached the gospel further out into the Roman Empire he and his converts suffered persecution but also saw God work through His Word to bring sinners to eternal life. The Holy Spirit is with us today. He lives in us. He speaks to us and guides us through the Word of God read, heard, preached and taught. He comforts and encourages us through the body and blood of our Living Savior and Lord. And He opens our mouths to tell our neighbors how God has made a place for them in His company. They aren't alone. They aren't what they've imagined themselves to be. But what they are through faith in Christ's gospel is much better than that. Praise God, His ways for us in Jesus are good! Amen.