

MINISTER'S MESSAGE

SUNDAY MAY 5 2024

KNOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Gentiles?”

Based on Acts 10:44-48

I watched a video on Facebook the other day. A traffic camera caught the whole thing on film. An elderly woman was trying to cross a busy intersection with multiple lanes. There was a marked pedestrian walkway, but no lighting to help. Cars were moving at full speed in both directions, and no one was slowing down. Until that is, a group of Hells Angels bikers pulled up to the intersection. The lead rider stopped, and the riders behind him fanned out to block all the lanes of traffic. The rider then got off his bike, when over to the elderly lady, took her arm and safely escorted her to the other side of the street before returning to his bike and heading on his way.

You've probably seen videos like this before and it is one of those quick little feel-good moments. But it does raise some more challenging questions:

➤ How many 'good' people passed that woman by and didn't stop, because they were too busy, late for work, or didn't want to be bothered?

Let's make it a little more difficult...

➤ How many good Christians passed that woman by because they forgot that Jesus made a point to stop and help those in need and those less able to help themselves?

Let's make even more uncomfortable...

➤ What if the bikers had been on their way to a drug deal when they stopped to help the elderly lady? How do we feel about being taught a lesson in kindness by people we have told are different, dangerous, and we shouldn't associate with?

It's an 'us' and 'them' problem. 'Us' is the believers, the chosen ones, God's children. 'Them' is everyone else out there that doesn't fit that mold. Gentiles.

But let's give Peter and John and the Jewish community a break for a minute. In the time of Abraham, the Jewish community had been promised by God that their people would be as numerous as the stars, the 'Chosen People.' Generations later, Moses led them to the Promised Land, stretched out his hands and said, "All this is yours." What they didn't write

down in the Book of Exodus was that in order to move 'into' the land they believed God had promised them, they had to 'move out' everyone else who was already living there. Gentiles. The other people who were not Jews. Generations later, Jesus came along. And it's not that Jesus disapproved of Gentiles. Quite the opposite. It's just that Jesus was born into a Jewish family in a Jewish community and preached mainly to the Jewish people from familiar places filled with other Jewish people.

So it shouldn't come as much of a surprise that in those early days of Christianity, Peter and John were of the belief that they would keep doing ministry the same way that Jesus had done, with the same people they had always preached to. Gentiles, others, were not seen as a meaningful part of the original plan. But the Holy Spirit had other plans.

When the Spirit swept through, eyes were opened, hearts were moved, and viewpoints were called into question. Believers saw that the Holy Spirit did not move around, avoid or skip over

Gentiles, like the angel of death had done at Passover so long ago. The Holy Spirit fell upon everyone. It was no longer Jew or Gentile. It was no longer 'us' and 'them.' It was just, us!

- There was something good to be found in everyone, if you cared to look carefully. Even difficult people had a splash of glory if you gave it a moment of your time to consider.
- There was something to be learned from everyone, if you would stop and listen to another's viewpoint.
- There was something beautiful about exploring other cultures, eating their food, and hearing their stories, leading them to Christ.

It almost sounds like a 'Shangri-La' moment.

- The Apostles could see the opportunity for their church to grow.
- Those who had never heard the Good News before found a resting place for their longing hearts.
- Those who had quietly believed, but had never been welcomed into the fold before, now found a spiritual home and community to nurture their faith.

But my struggle with this moment is just how seamlessly Peter and John seemed to be able to change hundreds of generations of teaching and worshipping and believing with just a few words. My experience of

changing people's thinking in the church needs a much, much longer time line!

- I remember the first time a Person of Colour walked into one of my congregations to worship, and the looks, and the whispers, and the raised eyebrows.
- I still remember the day my uncle brought home his beautiful bride-to-be home to the family and announced their wedding would be in the Roman Catholic church.
- Do you remember the days when someone like me would not have been allowed to be in this pulpit? Now would that be because I am a woman, or because I am divorced, or both? <grin>
- And more recently, the decade long debate of whether the LGBTQ Community could be welcomed into our pews and into our leadership? These are not easy conversations, and viewpoints that are not quickly changed.

Yes or no? In or out? Us or them? Gentiles.

The word may be ancient, but the issue is still with us. Peter and John had to make a choice:

- Embrace the change God presented,
- Turn away and pretend it didn't happen.

➤ One choice leads to live and grow with a broadening of the arms of Christ to include others, Gentiles we had not

'seen' before or had not considered would be 'likely sons and daughters of Christ'.
➤ The other choice leads to stagnation, boredom, decline, and eventually, death.

Peter and John responded:
*"Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water.
They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."* (v47).

- I'm pretty sure Peter and John did not know at this time, just what a church with Jews and Gentiles together was going to look like.
- I'm pretty sure there was a lot of anxiety at the next Session meeting about how to take care of people they did not understand or know very well,
- And I'm pretty sure the Board was grumbling about all the extra expenses that were going to crop up because of having to take care of these new people.

But because of Peter's choice, the church grew.

- Not just in numbers
- But in understanding.
- By including others they did not yet fully understand.
- Because they trusted that the Holy Spirit would not lead them astray.

So, who or what are the Gentiles of today?

What does the Holy Spirit say about them or their ideas? And what do we do about that here at Knox? Amen.