

A story. A Southern Baptist pastor answered the phone one day and heard a man's voice. "Please send six cases of whiskey to my house," said the voice. "We're having a big party." To say the least, the pastor was surprised. Southern Baptist pastors are not in the habit of delivering cases of whiskey to people's homes. Even more surprising, he recognized the voice as being that of one of his deacons. Evidently, the deacon had been calling the local liquor store and called his pastor's phone by mistake.

"Brother Jones," the pastor said to the man, "This is your pastor." It got real quiet on the other end of the line, "Well, pastor," asked the deacon, "And just what are you doing at the liquor store?"

Pastors get surprises sometimes. Some are pleasant; some are not so pleasant. And some surprises turn your whole world upside down. Our lesson today from Acts 10 is about a surprise that turned the world upside down for the early church.

Up until today's lesson, Christianity had, for the most part, been a Jewish sect. Samaritans were welcome, for they were regarded as half-Jews. But, before Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, no Gentiles had been welcomed into the fraternity. And the Ethiopian's baptism took place out in the wilderness, far from Jerusalem. Who would even know?

Here, we have a Roman centurion, an army officer, named Cornelius, a man described by Luke, the author of Acts, as devout and generous. And he was a Gentile. Cornelius had a vision, a vision of an angel instructing him to send for a man named Simon Peter who was staying in a home in Joppa. Cornelius heeded the angel's instructions and sent three of his men to Joppa to bring Peter back.

While the three men were on their journey, something extraordinary was happening in Joppa. This same Simon Peter had gone up to the roof of the house where he was staying to pray and he, too, had a vision. "He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.' 'Surely not, Lord!' Peter replies, 'I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.' The voice spoke to him a second time, 'Do not call

anything impure that God has made clean.”” This happened three times, and then the sheet was taken back to heaven.

While Peter was pondering this vision, the men sent by Cornelius arrived at the house where Peter was staying. And the Spirit spoke to Peter telling him to go with the three men.

The next day Peter did just that, taking with him a few of his Christian friends. When they got to the house of Cornelius, they found a large group of people gathered there, relatives and close friends of Cornelius. At first, this disturbed Peter. These were Gentiles. But then Peter remembered his dream.

So, at the invitation of Cornelius, Simon Peter begins to speak to those gathered. He begins speaking to them where our passage ends. “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.” As he goes into preaching the Good News and eventually baptizing those gathered, he repeats this opening in a different way just a few verses down, in verse 34. He says, “I now realize how true it is, that God does not show favoritism, but accepts all from every nation who fear him and do what is right.”

“God does not show favoritism” That’s a radical statement even today. Every group I know expects God to show partiality to its own group. Even with a football or baseball game, people want God to favor their team.

Two thousand years ago in Judea, this was a particularly important theme. The Jewish people had survived by being exclusive. And even the early Christian church restricted itself to those who were circumcised Jews. Now Peter was disregarding all that. No one is to be regarded as impure or unclean. It was an amazing turnabout.

Peter had no idea when he woke that day before, what lay in store for him over the next 36 hours. The whole mission of the Christian community had been turned on its head. Things would never again be the same. That’s what happens when the Spirit moves. Things are changed. People are changed. Social situations change.

Often over the past 60 years or so, when we come to this Scripture, we emphasize the inclusiveness of the Gospel. That’s pretty understandable. Peter suddenly realizes that

all people were God's children, and that he dare not refuse baptism to anyone because of the cultural or racial background.

This truth has been particularly important to us since the days of the Civil Rights movement. The Civil Rights movement was a shock to American society. But who can doubt it was led by the Spirit of God? When the Spirit moves, walls come down. So generally, when we come to this text, that's the first thing we see. How the Spirit batters down the walls that separate people.

But we might also see what this moving by the Spirit did for the church. When Peter baptized Cornelius and the other Gentiles, it opened the church to astounding growth. Soon those from Gentile backgrounds far outnumbered those from Jewish backgrounds. Imagine if Christianity had remained a Jewish sect. Would we have had the same impact on the world? Not by a long shot. Can we not see that inclusiveness is beyond a politically correct approach to life? Inclusiveness is part of God's plan for establishing God's Kingdom. This is the reason Christ came into the world. To reach out to all people.

As followers of Jesus, our primary goal isn't to preserve American culture but to minister to people, all people, and to share in the coming of God's Kingdom. This is not to disparage those who hold legitimate concerns about the issues before this country. It is to say that our priority as the church of Jesus Christ is to reach out to all people regardless of who they are or what they've done or where they came from. We are to do this so that kingdoms of the world might become the Kingdom of our God.

To our graduates today, as you go out into the world, you will encounter many approaches to religious beliefs. I pray that you will remember your heritage here – one which proclaims we follow a God of love and acceptance. Not a God of condemnation or rejection. We follow a God of new possibilities. And the living Spirit of Christ continues to lead us in new ways. Yes, the Methodist pathway ahead might take divergent paths. Still, we are grounded in being a church of open hearts, open minds and open doors.

About 30 years ago, a high school youth group headed out on their annual work camp and backpacking trip. That year they based out of Blue Lake Youth Camp in California. One of the boys who went along on that trip was from another church, and didn't really know the youth or the adult leaders. His name was Ben, and he was, to put it kindly, a

challenge. The leaders had been given the heads-up on Ben. He was a troubled young man who was often belligerent toward people in positions of authority. It was no mystery why he acted that way; his father was serving time in prison. The minister from Ben's church had begged the youth leaders to include Ben believing the experience would be good for him.

The leaders, Bob and Margie, were nervous when the trip began, but it turned out to be a positive experience. Ben had a couple of minor outbursts along the way, but Bob and Margie were patient with him, and they treated him with more kindness than he was accustomed to experiencing. A few weeks following the trip, Ben got back together with the group to share pictures and remembrances of their special time together. That was the last time the group saw him.

Sixteen years later, Bob went back to Blue Lake Camp, and happened to Ben there working on one of the cabins. His story unfolded. After high school, Ben went into the Marines for six years and then on to college where he graduated with honors. He was now married and in charge of a local school district's IT department. Ben told Bob that the work camp & backpacking experience with Bob had been a pivotal event in his life, and he considered it the first real time of being included in and appreciated by a group of people. He was very grateful for the way Bob and Margie cared for him. Bob was stunned, because he had practically forgotten the trip, and he had no idea that it had changed a young man's life.

Now, here's what's important: Ben's name could have been Jose, or he could have been a she. It doesn't make a difference. What matters is, that the followers of Jesus Christ share his love with all people. My friends, that is our reason for being here. This is our task. This is our calling. Amen.