

Peter's vision

The main part of today's reading is sometimes referred to as the Gentile Pentecost. The story actually begins in Chapter 10. It's the longest story in the New Testament. This is Peter's retelling of the story before the brothers and sisters in Judea. It summarizes a very long story at least somewhat succinctly.

The last bit we read – from verse 19 to the end - I included for historical interest. Somebody asked me where and when Christians were first called Christians. It was in Antioch. After Stephen's death by stoning in Jerusalem, many of the disciples scattered to the surrounding towns, and Antioch – now in modern day Turkey – was one of them.

We're going to focus on the first part of the story...the conversion of this Roman household, and the reactions of the Jews involved. The man whose household the messengers took Peter to was named Cornelius.

Cornelius was a Roman centurion. He was a devout worshipper of the God of Israel, but he was not Jewish. He was not even someone who converted to Judaism – he was not circumcised.

When Peter first got to Cornelius's house, he began telling them about Jesus. While Cornelius and his household were listening to Peter, before he could even finish, the Holy Spirit fell upon them. This was apparently very dramatic. The primary sign of the Holy Spirit in Acts is speaking in tongues. In modern day Pentecostal churches, it still is. They call it Spirit baptism.

Well, when the Spirit got involved...and the drama unfolded...Peter couldn't help but jump into the flow. He baptized the whole household. All that happened in Chapter 10.

Now Peter has to explain himself, because his colleagues in Jerusalem are not impressed. Honestly, the brothers and sisters in Judea seem less bothered by the baptism of Gentiles – the uncircumcised – than the fact that Peter ate with them.

OK, so what's up with that? In the grand scheme of life's problems, even in the 1st Century, how big a deal is it that Peter ate with Gentiles?

Well, it's pretty big. See this isn't just about being proper. This is a question of identity. For their entire history, Israel has been a people set apart from the nations around them. Even though they often forgot what God set them apart *for*, they held fast to that identity.

Circumcision and the purity laws...the laws which set them apart...were so deeply embedded in the heart and soul of Israel that it felt like what Peter did would lead to the end of God's people as a people. They would cease to be who they were.

And perhaps underneath that fear was the fear that they would cease to be God's people. It is only slowly beginning to dawn on them...that what's happening under the wild wind of the Spirit is an expansion of God's people, not the end.

The Holy Spirit is always about expanding the kingdom. The problem is that God's people aren't always ready for that. The Spirit will always push the church forward to greater love for all people – even the ones we don't think should belong until they change something about themselves and who they are.

In the first century it was circumcision. In the 21st century we have our own categories of people we think should change to be more like us before they can be fully part of us. And it doesn't matter what your political leanings are, I'd venture to guess at one time or another we've all had a particular group that we'd rather keep on the outside.

The Holy Spirit is ahead of Peter and the Church. And you can see the backlash. Any time you see that an attempt by some in the church to be more inclusive is met by backlash, you can be sure the Spirit is uncomfortably ahead of the people.

But the Spirit can't be stopped. Later in the book and in other books of the New Testament, we'll see this battle rage on. Should Gentiles undergo the Jewish sign of covenant – circumcision – before they could be Christians?

At a Jerusalem council later in the story, we'll learn that they finally decided, no they don't. Nobody any longer debates whether circumcision is required to be part of the church. It might even seem ludicrous to us now that they ever did.

As always though, when we're talking about the Spirit, and the work of the Spirit, discernment is part of the picture. So how do we discern? How do we see what the Spirit is doing? Should we really include all people? Are there times when certain people are so damaging to the community, or some of its members they should be removed?

That was as sticky then as it is now. There are some later examples in Paul's letters. But the key needs to always be to measure our discernment against the works of the Spirit. I printed that again this week for you. Does our discernment of what the Spirit is doing match the biblical list of works of the Spirit?

In 2009 the ELCA met in assembly at Central Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. That's the one where the assembly voted to allow congregations to call gay pastors in committed relationships.

During the assembly, there was a major thunderstorm with very high winds. The wind damaged Central Lutheran Church.

There were folks who said that was the wind of the Holy Spirit leading the church forward. Others said it was the wrath of God. So is that how we discern? Look for signs in the weather?

I'm going to go with no. It was a Midwest city in the summer. We all know from recent experience that weather here is sometimes really dicey.

And gosh – wouldn't Spirit baptism be a helpful clue? If there could just be people speaking in tongues to show us we're on the right path, maybe that would settle things.

But we as a denomination are fairly skeptical of Spirit baptism and speaking in tongues anyway. I withhold judgement – we are on thin ice when we say the Holy Spirit can't show power in a particular way, and the gift of tongues is very biblical. I just haven't seen it...most people in mainline denominations have not seen it in their own churches.

But we do get signs.

That's where the list of works of the Holy Spirit can help us. I put it in the bulletin again.

Another list we'll talk about more next week – the fruits of the Holy Spirit – can help us as well.

We actually have one rather nice clue here in this reading – “Then God has given even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

Does a particular pathway we are trying to discern lead to life? Or not? Does it lead to love and care for others, including those we might have previously rejected?

Which course of action will result in the greatest degree of the fruits of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control?

The biblical works and fruits of the Spirit can be powerful guides as we discern what the Spirit is doing, even when it's in ways we find alarming, like the group Peter stood before.

There's one other thing to note from this reading – “then *God* has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

In the Book of Acts, Luke makes very clear that the transformation of people and the building up of the church is God's doing. It's the work of the Spirit. We are called to discern what the Spirit is doing... and then catch up.

I find that hopeful. I don't know what the future of today's Church looks like. But I find hope in the fact that the church, as it has always been, is in God's hands.

I trust that the Spirit is still doing things, both in our congregation and in the larger Church.

And just as in the first century, God continues to give the repentance that leads to life...to us...and to people who surprise us.