

“The Welcome of God”

Acts 11:1-18

July 20, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

About two years ago, we introduced an element to our worship services that we call “The Welcome of God.” As you know, it’s that portion of the worship service in which we greet one another, extending a welcome to others because God has welcomed us. We do this for two reasons. First, there is a direct command in the Bible that we do so. Six times we are commanded to greet one another, and most of those commands tell us to do so “with a holy kiss.” The holy kiss is the manner of greeting that fit that culture, whereas the handshake is our cultural practice. The command is binding upon us, while the precise cultural expression changes.

There is another reason for the “Welcome of God” element of our worship service. It is the theological reason that we express in almost every worship service at this church. We say, “Welcome one another even as God welcomes us.” The welcome of God is the act by which God takes those who are outsiders and makes them insiders. The passage before us this morning is all about God’s work to make an outsider an insider. Cornelius was the outsider because he was a Gentile. He was drawn to the God of the Jews, but reminded in multiple ways that he was an outsider. Peter gave voice to his outsider status in a rather remarkable way. Cornelius had assembled his entire household and many of his friends and acquaintances. He was a man of influence, so he probably had quite a few people gathered in his house. He had told them of the angel who had appeared to him and told him to send for a man named Peter, who would come to him with a message from God. Peter walks in and the opening sentence of his speech is not the most welcoming message. **“You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation”** (10:28). Because of their laws of ritual uncleanness and dietary restrictions, the Jews would not enter the house of a Gentile nor invite a Gentile into their home. So even though Cornelius had been drawn to the God of the Jews and had participated regularly in their synagogue services, he had never been invited into their homes for dinner. They would accept his money, but they wouldn’t fully accept him.

Have you ever been in a group where you felt like an outsider? I remember one weekend Boy Scout camping trip I once participated in with Matthew right after we moved to Birmingham. Being new to this troop, Matthew wanted me to join him for this weekend campout. There were about three other dads who also came on the trip, and it became quickly apparent to me that they were regulars at these events. As they shared insider stories and well-practiced routines for which I was not equipped or prepared, my outsider status became

quickly and painfully apparent. The boys in the troop followed the lead of their dads, only with the addition of some animosity toward Matthew that was lacking in the behavior of the dads. Not surprisingly, it wasn't long after that weekend that Matthew dropped out of that troop.

Like all Gentiles, Cornelius was an outsider. In the gospel, though, outsiders become insiders because God welcomes them to the inside. The theme of these two chapters is God's welcome to such outsiders. Notice three things about this welcome.

I. The Architect of Welcome

The theme of this account is contained in 11:17. **“If then God gave the same gift to them (the Holy Spirit) as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?”** There were no Christians who included in their master plan of world evangelization the idea of reaching Gentiles with the gospel apart from a conversion to Judaism. Prior to Acts 10, Christianity was a Jewish renewal movement. All Christians (with few exceptions) were Jews. If a Gentile wanted to become a Christian, he must first of all become a Jew. That was the mindset prevailing in the church until the events recorded in this chapter. No earthly leader of the church had plotted this course. As a matter of fact, all the earthly leaders initially resisted this course. They changed their view only after it became undeniably apparent that God was welcoming Gentiles without requiring that they first convert to Judaism. Notice the steps God takes to make it abundantly clear that he welcomes Gentiles.

The first thing I see God doing is putting within Cornelius a heart for God. Luke enumerates three qualities he possessed: a fear of God, generosity, and a heart for prayer. These should not be seen as works of human merit, but rather as an indication of God's pre-salvation work in the heart of Cornelius. God was preparing this man for salvation long before Peter showed up to proclaim to him the gospel. So far in the book of Acts, we have noticed that every convert has a history with God prior to their conversion. It is the same today. Long before someone comes to faith in Christ, God has been working in their lives.

The second thing I see God doing is working to prepare Peter to welcome Cornelius as God welcomes him. In a sermon I preached on this passage a few years ago, I titled the sermon “The Conversion of Peter” in order to emphasize the point that there are really two conversions in these chapters. Not only must Cornelius be converted, but prior to that, Peter must be converted. Peter's conversion was not a conversion unto salvation, but one unto the full welcoming heart of God. Prior to this story, Peter believed that Jews were clean and Gentiles unclean. Gentiles must first get ritually clean by embracing Jewish ceremonial laws, and then they could come to Jesus in faith. That's the

point of this vision Peter has, where the sheet containing both clean and unclean food is let down from heaven with the command to Peter to **“kill and eat”** (10:13). It is the voice of the Lord, and in typical fashion for Peter, he rebukes the Lord and says, **“By no means.”** This sequence of events happens three times. Peter finally gets the point, which he reports to us in verse 28. **“God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.”** Did you notice the change from unclean food to people? God didn’t just show him there were no more unclean foods, but that there was no person who was unclean in the sense of having to perform some act of cleansing prior to coming to Christ.

The third thing God did to demonstrate his welcome of outsiders and his determination to make them insiders was to orchestrate with perfect timing this interchange between Peter and Cornelius. God tells Cornelius to send to Joppa for Peter. After a 32 mile journey and two days of travel, they arrive at the place where Peter is staying at the precise moment that Peter is trying to understand the vision he has just had. He is told not to hesitate to accompany them back to Caesarea. Then he arrives back in that place, again after a two day walk, as Cornelius has gathered his household and friends ready to hear Peter.

Finally, and most conclusively, God sends his Spirit upon these Gentiles. **“While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word”** (10:44). As result, they spoke in tongues just as the Jews had done back in chapter 2. Some have called this the Gentile Pentecost. It was this act, as much as anything, that led the Jewish Christian leaders back in Jerusalem to conclude that God had granted repentance to the Gentiles.

Let me mention one quick application before moving on from this point. God is not reluctant to bring people to faith in Christ. It is we, like Peter, who are often the reluctant ones. When we pray to him for the conversion of the lost, we must remember that he is not reluctant.

II. The Messenger of Welcome

Though God is the architect of this welcome, he insists that Peter be the spokesman for it. If Peter or other Christians would not go and welcome Cornelius, then no one was going to do it. I notice this in the message the angel gave to him. **“Send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter”** (v. 5). Why couldn’t the angel have given the message Peter later gave? Angels are more impressive than men. This angel definitely caught the attention of Cornelius, as he initially responded to the angel by staring at him in terror (v. 4). But God has assigned the treasure of the gospel to be carried by men and women, not angels. He has no plan B for this. I notice too that he has no secondary plan for discipling new converts either. The last verse of this chapter

records how Cornelius and those with him asked Peter to stay with them for a few days after they were converted and baptized. Undoubtedly, Peter used that time to teach and instruct them in the faith. The gift of the Spirit they had just received was necessary, but insufficient. God has appointed human teachers to be the ones who teach converts as well as those who bring to men and women the gospel in the first place.

It's not just that Christians are to be messengers of God's welcome to outsiders, but we are to embody that welcome in our behavior. God insists that the expression of his welcome should come through the welcome of Peter and the Jewish Christians. It is still the same today. Part of our proclamation of the gospel is to demonstrate the welcome of God through our welcome of others. The idea that God welcomes sinners who come to him through Jesus is a powerful idea. The posture of God is not that of an angry man standing with a scowl on his face and arms crossed. His arms are now open and a smile is on his face. And now we are to give a tangible expression of that welcome through our welcome of others. A welcome is a powerful thing.

Illustration: I still remember the day when Wendy and I dropped off Kathryn, our youngest child, for her first day of fifth grade. She had been homeschooled up to that point, so this was her first venture into public school. I can still remember the look of fear in her eyes as we dropped her off at the curb for her first day of school. It wasn't until about 7 hours later that we found out what happened. She walked through the front door of the school and headed for the classroom where she would be staying that year. In answer to her prayers, and the fervent prayers of her parents, awaiting her there was a girl she had met while playing soccer. This girl was not a first year student, and she welcomed Kathryn in the natural way that fifth grade girls can do (before they become overly self-conscious Jr. High girls).

We are called to live the gospel as we welcome others, even when they are culturally distant from us. Are we prepared to welcome like this? If a heavily tattooed and pierced young man visited our church, would we welcome him fully? I'm not asking if we would respond to him politely, though I hope we would. But southern culture, apart from any work of God's Spirit, is enough to cause us to respond with politeness. Would you be able to imagine what it must feel like to walk into a traditional suburban church and see no one who looks like you? And would your heart go out to such a one so that you are willing to labor in order to make this outsider feel like an insider? Would you invite him to your home for dinner? Would your response be like that of the medieval monk I have mentioned before? He was the doorkeeper in the monastery and whenever he heard a knock at the gate, he would fling open the door and even before knowing anything about the visitor would say to him, "Oh! Thank God you've come!" This was his practice with every single visitor.

III. The Message of Welcome

Luke records in 10:34-43 the message Peter preaches to Cornelius and the other Gentiles gathered with him. It is a message that brings these outsiders to the place of becoming insiders. It seems that Peter is not allowed to finish his message, because God interrupts him with the sending of the Holy Spirit. Notice how this is a message of welcome centered on Jesus. This passage is a great example of the apostolic teaching about the person and work of Jesus. Notice how Peter speaks of him as **“Lord of all”** (10:36) but also a man who was fully human. **“God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power”** (v. 38). The one who is the Lord of all is also a man, a man with a human origin (from Nazareth) as well as divine. This God-man went about doing good, releasing people from the power of the devil. But this good man was put to death, the cursed death of being hung on a tree. God raised him up and he appeared to many witnesses.

I would like for us to focus on two of the ways Peter speaks of Jesus. He is **“judge of the living and the dead”** as well as the one who brings forgiveness of sins. First, he is the judge of all. Every one of us will stand before Jesus as Judge, just as certain as the sun rose in the sky this morning. No amount of money or influence will be able to purchase escape from this judgment. It doesn't matter where you went to school, who your parents were or where you lived or went to church. He is holy and righteous and cannot show favoritism in the way he judges. Further, every sin will be judged. Jesus warned us about this judgment with these words. **“Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops”** (Luke 12:2-3). Every sin will be judged completely and fairly. But thanks be to God, not every sinner will be judged. Peter declares that **“everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name”** (10:43).

How is it that every sin will be judged but not every sinner? Jesus, the quintessential insider, second member of the holy Trinity, became an outsider. Sin was laid upon him and judged there when Jesus hung on that tree (v. 39). He was cursed and judged in our place, becoming an outsider as the Father turned his back on Jesus and forsook him. He did this that you and I might become insiders. So every sin will be judged, either in the death of Jesus or in the eternal judgment brought by Jesus on Judgment Day.

CONCLUSION:

We will never be able to extend the welcome of God to others until we feel the wonder of God's making insiders of those of us who by nature are outsiders. May God help us to do so!