***EVEN THEM?***

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Texts: Acts 10:34-48 and Matthew 3:13-17

For my birthday last month my wife was kind enough to give me a card with this touching “senior birthday prayer”:

*God grant me the senility to forget the people I never liked anyway,*

*the good fortune to run into the ones I do…*

*and the eyesight to tell the difference.*

I am not sure whether it was the prayer or the senility reference that made her think of me when she saw this card – perhaps both! But beneath the humor in the card there is an underlying assumption that speaks truth about the world in which we live. Increasingly our nation and to some degree our churches are divided between those we like and those we don’t like, those with whom we agree and those with whom we disagree. We recognize and socialize with those we like, and too often demonize those we dislike who seem to us dis-agreeable. It has gotten so bad that before the holidays there were a host of articles offering advice on how to survive family dinners at the table with those with whom you disagree. As one writer insightfully writes:

*The country isn’t merely polarized; it’s now “affectively polarized,” a social-science term meaning that people don’t merely disagree with one another; they actively dislike one another. A 2014 Stanford study revealed that partisans discriminate against opposing partisans “to a degree that exceeds discrimination based on race.” They dislike each other freely, they dislike each other frequently, and – rather than being tempered by the social mores that make racial or religious discrimination frowned upon – they dislike each other with pride.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

The polarization is not limited to politics.

For a long time 11:00 Sunday morning has been the most racially segregated hour in the country. We find new denominations forming to provide a haven for folks who can’t seem to find any other group of Christians with whom they can agree on all things. Within our Presbyterian denomination some churches and members are separating themselves from those with whom they disagree rather than be reconciled with them. A minister in this presbytery stated that he would not share communion with any minister with whom he disagreed about the issue of same-sex marriage thus negating the Lord’s Table as a place at which we might be united despite our disagreements. In his letter to the Ephesians Paul suggested that Christ has broken down the wall of hostility that divides uncircumcised Christians from circumcised Christians, but there are a host of folks who are working hard to build new walls between themselves and those brothers and sisters in Christ with whom they don’t see eye to eye.

Groucho Marx famously said, “I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member.” More and more folks seem to be refusing to join any club or church that would have anyone *unlike me* as a member! The church seems to be reflecting the culture of polarization rather than offering a faithful alternative of unity in Christ. What then are we to do?

A good starting point might be to look to the example of the early church which had its own share of polarity problems. In the Book of Acts we find Luke’s account of the shaping of the early church from that upper room in Jerusalem where the Spirit swept in at Pentecost to the mission of Paul among Gentile communities all around the Mediterranean. The conversion of Cornelius and the Gentiles is perhaps THE pivotal event in that story of the formation of the early church. Luke’s account of that conversion takes up almost two chapters (66 verses) – more verses than the account of that first Pentecost! What happened?

Peter had been invited to Cornelius’ home to speak to a gathering of his family and friends. Cornelius was a Roman centurion and a God-fearing man who prayed to the Lord and gave alms, but he was still an uncircumcised Gentile, unclean in the eyes of Jews and Jewish Christians. Cornelius invited Peter because he had a vision in which an angel told him to bring Peter to his home. Peter had a vision of his own – three times he saw a large sheet descend from heaven with all kinds of animals on it and he heard a voice tell him to kill and eat; when Peter objected that the animals were unclean, the voice told him, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” Peter was pondering what that vision meant when two soldiers arrived and asked him to come with them to Cornelius’ home.

Peter could have stayed where he was and pondered away about the meaning of his vision, but sometimes you have to get away from home to understand what God has in mind. Often when I am stuck on what direction the sermon should go next, I find that pounding the keys of my computer in my office is far less productive than going out to visit someone. Sitting around and waiting for some divine revelation or answer to a question that will shed light on your life may be less helpful than getting up out of your recliner and going out to do God’s work. It may be there – among the folks at Valley Mission or on the porch rocking with the friend you’ve been meaning to visit or while hammering a nail on a Habitat project that God speaks the word you’ve been waiting to hear.

So it was for Peter. Instead of staying at home and pondering the vision, he went with the soldiers, taking along some of the circumcised believers from Joppa, to the home of the centurion Cornelius. It was not until he arrived at the house and heard Cornelius describe his vision that Peter fully understood his own vision. What he understood was this:

*God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.*

God was the God of all people, and God alone chose who was divinely acceptable. Unclean Gentiles might be made “clean” by God. The visions of Peter (the Jewish Christian) and Cornelius (the Gentile God-fearer) were tied by a common thread which belonged to God. So Peter began to tell the Gentiles about Jesus, to tell them about his life, death and resurrection, the good news he proclaimed and the forgiveness of sins offered to all who believe in him. While he was speaking to them Peter was rudely interrupted by the Holy Spirit, his elegant sermon drowned out by a clatter of tongues and shouts of praise from the lips of the Gentiles. It wasn’t the eloquence of his sermon that inspired them. The wind of the Holy Spirit swept them away before Peter had baptized them or asked for their confession of faith or even invited them to new member classes.

God took the initiative to welcome those Gentiles into the family of faith. God didn’t wait for them to choose God; God chose them first! Jewish Christians were astounded that God would choose Gentiles of all people! The Jewish Christians had faithfully observed boundaries under the law and built fences to distinguish themselves from the rest of the world. Before their eyes those fences were swept away as the unclean Gentiles were welcomed into the community of Christ. “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit as we have?” asked Peter. And of course no one could, for the Gentiles had been chosen by God and blessed with the Holy Spirit!

The story in Acts is the story of an ever-widening circle of faith that embraces very different people who often were poles apart. It is the story of a growing community of Christ that began with a core group of faithful disciples and expanded to include Jews, then Samaritans, then Gentiles who feared God, and then Gentiles who had never even known God. The common thread across all those divides was their common belief in Jesus as Savior and Messiah. The power of the Holy Spirit working in and through their lives broke down barrier after barrier with love, grace and faith to welcome men, women, and children from very different places in life into the family of God.

Ogden Nash once wrote of God’s chosen people, “How odd of God to choose the Jews.” But is it any less odd for God to choose the Gentiles or impetuous Peter and the disciples or you and me? It is God’s choice – not ours! The recipients of God’s Spirit are not those whom we have approved for that divine gift. They are those whom God has chosen. That is what infant baptism is about – the recognition that God chooses us before we can even begin to choose God. That is what the church is about – the pouring out of God’s Spirit on diverse people, on unexpected people,

on Jews and Gentiles,

men and women,

black, white and every shade in between,

blue collar, white collar and no collar,

young and old,

gay and straight,

Republicans, Democrats, Socialists, and Communists,

Americans and un-Americans,

people like you and

people most unlike you.

If any in that litany are unexpected or unacceptable to you, then you know how Peter’s companions felt to see Cornelius and his Gentile friends praising God under the power of the Spirit. The Spirit is poured out on those whom God chooses, sinners all, in need of the grace of God.

Two thousand years later the Spirit continues to be at work in our midst to break down the walls that divide us, to unite us in Christ not just with those we like or with whom we agree on all things but with those who follow Jesus, those whom God chooses – even some of those we doubt God would ever choose. As the anonymous poet reminds us:

*I was shocked, confused, bewildered as I entered Heaven’s door.*

*Not by the beauty of it all, nor the lights or its décor.*

*But it was the folks in Heaven who made me sputter and gasp,*

*the thieves, the liars, the sinners, the alcoholics and the trash.*

*There stood the kid from seventh grade who swiped my lunch money twice.*

*Next to him was my old neighbor who never said anything nice.*

*Herb, who I always thought was rotting away in hell,*

*was sitting pretty on cloud nine, looking incredibly well.*

*I nudged Jesus, ‘What’s the deal? I would love to hear your take.*

*How’d all these sinners get up here? God must’ve made a mistake.*

*And why’s everyone so quiet? C’mon just give me a clue.”*

*“Child,” He said, “They’re all in shock. They never thought*

*they’d see you!”*

We may be amazed at those whom God chooses to be faithful disciples in the 21st century, and others may be amazed that God would choose us. Perhaps in this polarized culture in which we live, we should spend less time judging who God should choose and spend more time witnessing faithfully to Jesus Christ by listening humbly, by speaking the truth in love (always in love), by working for justice while engaging those with whom we disagree, by loving one another across the divides, and by affirming that what unites us in Christ is greater than any of those walls that divide us. We still may disagree with one another, but perhaps we can do so faithfully and rewrite that birthday card to read:

*God grant me the humility to love the people I never liked anyway,*

*The good fortune to run into the ones I do…*

*And the eyesight to see them all as you do – as children of God!* Amen

1. ‘They Are Never Grrreat’, Monica Hesse, *The Washington Post*, December 13, 2016, p.C1,3 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)