

## “Standing in God’s Way”

Acts 11:1-18

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • August 7, 2016

My grandmother used to say that good news travels fast but bad news travels faster. And of course, nothing travels as fast as gossip. And that’s exactly what we see in our passage this morning. Peter is on a mission trip to the city of Joppa, which is part of modern-day Tel-Aviv in Israel. While he’s there, God appears to him in a vision and tells him to go to Caesarea, which was the center of Roman rule in Israel. Not only is Peter to go to this pagan city, but he is to go to the house of Cornelius, a Roman Centurion. Sometimes God calls *us* to go to unexpected places and unexpected people.

While Peter is there the Holy Spirit shows up and all of Cornelius’ household is converted. In fact, when this story is first told in chapter 10, the scene is described almost identically to Pentecost when the Apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit. And that’s really the point of the story. God has chosen these Gentiles, these outsiders, in the same way that he chose the Jewish Christians. He makes no distinction between them.

But now Peter has to return to Jerusalem. And so the first thing I want you to see in this passage is what I call *the suspicion*. When Peter arrives back in Jerusalem, the church members there have already heard about what happened at Cornelius’ house. The news has travelled faster than Peter. Verse 1 says that the “apostles and believers *throughout Judea* heard that the Gentiles had received the word of God.” Some of them, apparently, are not at all happy about it and they criticize Peter. These Jewish Christians were suspicious. Why?

I think that to understand why they were suspicious of these Gentile Christians, we need to understand a little about what life was like in Jerusalem at the time. An important issue for the Jews as well as the Jewish Christians had to do with their relationship with Rome. As most of you know, the land of Israel was occupied at the time by the Roman Empire and the Jewish people considered it an abomination for the pagan Romans to be in their country. Worse

than that, the Emperor Caligula had tried to have a statue of himself set up in the Temple in Jerusalem. And now here’s Peter getting quite friendly with this Roman Army Officer. It doesn’t look good.

Remember, too, that the Jerusalem Christians were still very much Jewish in those early years of the church. For the most part, they understood following Christ as a continuation of their Jewish religion, which included all of the ritual purity laws. Jews avoided Gentiles for fear of becoming ceremonially unclean and they especially didn’t eat with them because they were commanded not to eat anything unclean. For Peter and the others to eat with Cornelius and his family was a violation of their tradition. In fact, in Acts 10:28, Peter even says this to Cornelius. Notice that even Peter was suspicious at first about going to Cornelius’ home. John Calvin points out that their excessive love of their nation and their traditions prevented the Jerusalem Christians from acknowledging the work of God among the Gentiles.

That brings me to the second thing I want us to see in this passage today, *the surprise*. A surprise is something that catches us off guard, something we’re not expecting. The fun of a surprise birthday party is that the recipient is truly surprised. Of course not all surprises are fun. One day several years ago I came home from the office in the middle of the day and found our bathroom on fire. Surprised? Yes. Fun? No.

While in Joppa, Peter goes up on the roof to pray and he has a vision from God. In this vision he sees a large sheet lowered from heaven with animals – both clean and unclean – and he hears the voice that tells him to eat them. Peter is surprised because everything he’s ever been taught tells him not to eat unclean animals.

The vision is not really about animals, though. It’s about people. And that’s an even bigger surprise. Verse 12 says, “the Spirit told

me to go with them, making no distinction.” God told Peter that all of his assumptions about people were wrong.

The Gospel’s that way, though. Jesus always has a way of challenging what we think we know about who is *in* and who is *out* of the Kingdom of God. We are always tempted to set boundaries around the church, to draw the line in the sand and say that some are in and some are out. Some Christians today take a very narrow view about who is included in God’s Kingdom. They make up a list of rules that must be followed, most of which are things that are not allowed. They may insist that people must eat certain foods, or dress a certain way, or that their way of communion or baptism is the only right way. Once they’ve set these boundaries, everyone who doesn’t meet them is “out.” Not much grace there and the truth is that no one can be saved that way.

Other Christians take the complete opposite view that everyone is saved and going to heaven. In that way of thinking there are no standards for the way a Christian should act. To them, Jesus is merely a good moral example of how to live. As it turns out, that doesn’t involve much grace, either.

Peter was surprised that God sent him to a Gentile home. But he was even more surprised to find out that an angel had already been there preparing the way. In verse 13 Cornelius tells Peter how an angel had stood in his house and told him to send for Peter in Joppa. But I think Peter was most surprised that the Holy Spirit came upon these Gentiles in the same way as had happened to the disciples on Pentecost.

I think we are often surprised as well when we discover God at work around us. Think for a moment about who it is that we consider to be “outsiders.” Who is it that in your mind you think of as “them?” The surprise is that God wants “them” to be a part of “us.” But just as we’re surprised to discover God at work around us, we’re surprised that he is working in us. As the Holy Spirit works your life you become more and more aware of your sinful nature and

you become more aware of God’s forgiveness as well.

As God works to transform form you in the image of Christ, you will be surprised to find that you want to read the Bible more. You want to worship more and pray more. You will be surprised that you want to give more and to find more opportunities to serve. The biggest surprise will be that you no longer want to be the center of your life but that you want Christ to be the center of our life.

And that brings us to the third thing I want you to take away from this passage—*the surrender*. In verse 17, Peter says, “If God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” Peter surrenders to God’s will. He finally recognizes God working “outside the box.” Likewise, the other Christians in Jerusalem surrendered to God’s desire to bring all nations into his church. Verse 18 says, “When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

How often do we fail to recognize God at work around us? How often do we end up standing in God’s way? A clue may be when someone says, “that’s not the way we do it around here,” or, “we’ve never done it that way before.” Instead we should be looking for where God is working already get on board. We should be attentive to where he’s leading us to reach out to those who don’t know Christ yet.

If there’s one thing we can learn from this passage it’s that God will accomplish his will with or without us. But when we surrender our wills to his will, we get to participate in the work of God in our world. And that’s really what we mean in the Lord’s Prayer when we say, “your will be done.”

So let me ask you: Are you walking in the way or standing in the way?

*Amen.*