

Pastor Roy's Sermon from April 28, 2013

Grace, Mercy, and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4/28/13

This morning we heard part of the story of the first non Jews becoming followers of Christ—on equal ground with the Jewish sisters and brothers. It was a big deal. Up to this point in their lives, their Jewishness was their identity. Their love and reverence for a particular God who called them as a particular people was their basis for understanding the world and their place in the world.

These new followers of Christ might eat different things. They might not follow the basic rules of clean and unclean things to touch or eat. They might not really believe in the Jewish God. The Church might become more Greek than Hebrew. What if the essence of the faith was lost because they let just anybody in? And what was the essence of their faith? It was about to become more Christ centered than ethnically centered in Jewishness.

Peter had a vision which challenged their sacred views about who was ok and who was not.

Peter explains his vision to the church leaders in Jerusalem. For background, the Old Testament was clear on what was edible and what was to be avoided. Good Jews avoided the unclean things, animals **and** people. Granted, there had always been a disagreement in Judaism about whether Gentiles, non Jews, should be welcomed or avoided. Peter and the early Christians were all good Jews, or, at least, people who respected the rules and pretty much tried to follow them. On the issue of Gentiles, they were most comfortable with Jews and people that knew a lot about Judaism.

In Peter's vision, the Spirit of God says that they must not call unclean anything which God has made clean. This matter of welcoming non Jews compares with any of the issues of inclusion with which we struggle as a church today.

Peter says, “And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

Keep in mind that the test of repentance works both ways. The believers in Jerusalem were tested by the Spirit, would they listen to the evidence or would their hearts be cold as stone and reject the word and the Spirit of God? Fortunately even as the Gentiles accepted the word and Spirit of the Lord, so did the Jewish friends of Jesus.

But how did the believers know whether this new vision was from God or not? This is important because it suggests how we know today who is a follower of Jesus and who is not.

Peter's word that the Holy Spirit had come upon the Gentiles was the test. If the Spirit had come upon them, then God had accepted them. If God had accepted them, then they must **also** accept them. Otherwise, they would be putting themselves in the place of God.

But how did they know who has the Spirit? The test of the early church was that those who had the gifts of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit were filled with the Spirit.

Throughout the history of Judaism and Christianity, there has been the temptation to determine who has the Holy Spirit based upon rules and traditions. In Peter's day the rules and traditions were based on their interpretation of their Scriptures—the law, prophets, and books of poetry of the Hebrew Bible.

The challenge we face is to weigh our interpretations of the Scriptures. When we consider who to welcome, who to listen to, who to follow in matters of faith and practice, discernment is required. It was a challenge in Peter's day. It is a challenge in our day.

The fruit of the Spirit is evidence of the Spirit's presence in God's children. According to Paul in Galatians 5:22, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. In I Cor. 12:4, Paul says, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.”

The key to identifying where the Spirit is moving and in whom the Spirit is moving is summed up by Jesus in today's Gospel, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

It's not how and whether we follow the right rules in the right manner, but whether we have love. Love calls us to care, to nurture, to give honor where honor is due. Love calls us to live in freedom to share the same Spirit with others which God has shared with us.

In the midst of this gift of Love, “Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more. The home of God is among us. God is making all things new. It is complete, The Spirit of Jesus reveals the beginning and end. Indeed love is the gift of the water of life to us in our thirst and we have this gift and this Spirit to share with the thirsty all around us.

May we share this love with abandon and allow the Spirit to sort out the details and the judgments. Thanks be to God. Amen.