

Easter 5 May 2
How To Tell a Christian

(You can always tell a Christian, but you can't tell him/her much... old joke)

I want you to raise your hand this morning if your background is Jewish. OK – now raise your hand if back in Jesus' time you would be considered a Gentile. Yeah – all of us. I wonder what the state of the Christian church would be if Peter and Paul hadn't been courageous enough to carry God's message to gentiles – or if the Church leaders at that time had made stringent rules about how to treat Gentiles. Where would we be now? Rather, because of Peter's response to his God-given vision, and his willingness to stick to it in the face of great criticisms; and because of Paul's missions to the Gentile cities all around the Mediterranean Sea and willingness to endure criticisms and questions while maintaining the compassion of God – well, we're here today.

It's interesting that Peter, called on the carpet so to speak, simply tells over and over how he heard God speak, and how he saw evidence of the Holy Spirit. This story appears with all its details 3 times in Acts – that's a lot of emphasis. Much like Peter denies Christ 3 times, Jesus asks him "Do you love me?" 3 times, and in this vision, the sheet descends 3 times. So Peter tells his story. What he didn't do was get into lengthy discussions/debates about theological premises, which is unfortunately how we Christians get into trouble with each other. What silenced Peter's critics was the clear evidence that the Holy Spirit of God was acting, which is undeniable. So then the good believers had to deal with it. Most minds are changed and minds are opened by being confronted with a real situation.

Let's remind ourselves of what we know about Judaism & the early church at that time period. Jesus was Jewish, and all the early Christians were Jewish folks from the local synagogues who affirmed Jesus as the looked-for Messiah of God. The Jewish people were currently conquered by and ruled by the Roman Empire; Jerusalem and its Temple were available for worship, but the rulers, governors and so on were all Romans. Try & imagine what it was like - Imagine if we Americans, while living here where we are, were actually governed by a stronger military power with a different religion – say, perhaps, Saudi Arabia. It would make all of us Americans stick together, and try to preserve our ways – and especially American Christians. It would make our faith even more precious and our

defense of it important. For example, in reaction to the growing number of folks converting to Christianity and gathering new Scripture, the Jewish councils declared the Jewish Scripture completed – no more scrolls would be accepted. The Christians also protected the merging new movement called The Way early on, and somewhat later called Christianity.

In light of all of this, Peter going out to preach to Gentile folks was shocking. Gentiles didn't know the ways of God. Gentiles ate meat offered to idols at local temples to various gods and goddesses before being sold in the markets. Gentiles didn't keep the Law, or really even know much about it – or really even care. You didn't eat with Gentiles or have much to do with Gentiles – you kept yourself separate. Peter going to stay with Gentiles was bad enough – that the Gentiles responded to the gospel message was totally unimaginable. How could Gentiles, who didn't know God's ways at all, accept Jesus as Lord? How in the world could they worship together? Be a community together? Live together? The same kind of reactions the church has continued to have when confronted with the work of the Holy Spirit in peoples we've seen as outcast or impure.

This was a HUGE challenge to the early church, challenging the basic understanding of the whole world of faith; challenging to their way of life for the past centuries; challenging to the racial divide they lived with; challenging to concepts of good and bad, concepts of pure and impure, concepts of holy and profane. What do we do with Gentile believers? Can they really BE believers without becoming good Jews first? Does God really want them, after all these years of staying away from them? The same kind of questions the church has continued to ask when confronted with the work of the Holy Spirit in peoples we've seen as outcast or impure.

Their eventual openness to the work of the Holy Spirit and the embracing of Gentile believers has ramifications for the church today, as a model of what this "love for one another" as John has Jesus speak about, looks like in the world of reality. Eventually, after all the prejudices were broken down and challenges faced, the early church chose to follow where God was leading, to do an entirely new thing that was welcoming to all who believed. The early church chose the love of God for all peoples over their own walls of division they were accustomed to, and actually thought were God-given at one time. They chose to embrace this God-inspired change that showed compassion and love, and

therefore they accepted their own discomfort – and had to work through it, although it changed everything.

Peter is up front about saying he had to see the vision 3 times – and although he never relented in the vision itself, he realized its meaning when the Gentile Cornelius was at his door asking him to come and preach. The vision directly confronts the former religious categories of clean and unclean – God’s voice is telling him to kill an unclean animal and eat it, something his whole Jewish upbringing had drilled into him as a huge no-no. Not eating unclean animals was a major tenet of living a good Jewish life. Peter is repulsed – he thinks he is being tested, perhaps, or tempted somehow. He says, “God forbid! No!” Unclean, unclean!

Then when he opens the door to the Gentile Cornelius who is asking him to come preach, he realizes that his vision, far from being a test, is an invitation to extend the gospel to an unexpected people. It’s an even harder test - he’s being asked by God to go against his whole training, yet he’s sure it’s God. He is careful to take others with him so he’s not alone in this. And right before their eyes, these Gentiles are filled with the Spirit in the exact same way that the Jewish believers had been. It’s God, alright.

However, not everyone has that vision, and they don’t understand why he would do this. So he’s called before the council to explain himself. There’s a great question at the end of his retelling: “Who am I, that I should hinder God?” If God is moving, I want to be on the train. If the wind of the Spirit is blowing, I want to be carried where it’s going. Peter says, in effect, we can’t hinder God. God will do what God will do, with or without us, through us or through someone else. We’ll either be flattened or ignored, and we’ll miss the boat. There’s no way we can hinder God – we don’t want to go there. God is Life itself, and without God is only death. In one sense, it’s a clear choice – in another sense, it’s extremely hard.

Welcoming the Gentiles wasn’t quick and easy. Peter back-pedaled at one point and Paul called him to task on it. The council originally laid some observances on the Gentile converts, like not eating the meat offered to idols, but those eventually fell to the side, too. We know that it turns out that Gentile converts become the main wave of growth. Graciously, the Jewish believers taught and trained and passed along the understanding of

God that had sustained them for so long, although major pieces of behaviors and observances were left out. So the church of Jesus Christ grew.

There's a major lesson here, a major precedent. The love of God isn't historically static, for one thing – change happens. God isn't bound by what we think we know – we can't know enough to encompass God, so sometimes where God goes will shake us out of our older ways. We don't know God's whole vision, what all God intends – sometimes it will surprise us. (BTW, that's something I like about Presbies – we say “reformed and always BEING reformed” - so at least it's in our religious understanding that faith evolves, despite the fact that resist change as much as anyone else.) Its not easy – change is difficult, and resistance can be severe. Yet our call is to do the hard work of change, because we're following where God is already going. (Good thing God doesn't wait for us, or nothing would ever move. We're always playing catch-up to God.) Sometimes people of vision get battered. Well, we do what we are called to do, and we serve where God places us. Some seems to be asked to do various tasks – some are the point people, some are the organizers, some seem to be devil's advocates and make us think things through real well.

You know the origin of the devil's advocate? It was the priest appointed by the powers that be in Rome, who was given the task to dig into the life & backgrounds of candidates for Pope, to see if there were reasons to disqualify them. So it's not really a devilish or profane thing – although it was probably a pretty thankless task. What if we had such a person to vet our political candidates, huh? Maybe its called the other party.....

In the history of Christ's church, there's never been a time when we weren't debating about some issue or another – things aren't static, God's Spirit keeps nudging us on, pushing here, then there, then over there somewhere. We sort of go this way, then self-correct that way, hopefully listening for that vision, that word of God, that guides us more and more into faithfulness in our witness, into a deeper understanding of our mission, and into a fuller appreciation of God's compassion for the world. I'm sure we'll see this at the upcoming GA. May we each have the courage to follow God and carry out what is asked of us, and may Christ's Church continue to be moved by the Spirit into broader vision. AMEN.

Acts 11:1-18

11 Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³ saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” ⁴ Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵ “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. ⁶ As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷ I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸ But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ ¹⁰ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹ At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹² The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³ He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴ he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ ¹⁵ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶ 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.’ ¹⁷ 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?” ¹⁸ 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.”

Psalms 148

¹ Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights!

² Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!

³ Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!

⁴ Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!

⁵ Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created.

⁶ He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

⁷ Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps,

⁸ fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!

⁹ Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!

¹⁰ Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!

¹¹ Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!

¹² Young men and women alike, old and young together!

¹³ Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven.

¹⁴ He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the LORD!

Revelation 21:1-6

¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." ⁶Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

John 13:31-35

³¹When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' ³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."