

From the Pastor's Desk

Do you have God all figured out?

A major crisis in the early church was how to handle outsiders. The primary followers of Jesus were Jewish. Empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, his followers began preaching the Gospel and soon non-Jewish people (Gentiles) were attracted to Christianity. To see the full impact of this, we must understand that Judaism perceived Gentiles as outside the possibility of salvation. They were perceived as pagans who lived by their genitals (hence the word “gentile”). Sometimes they were referred to as “dogs”. In Acts 11 we can see the challenge the church faced:

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, ‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’

Not only did he visit these pagans, he ate with them, which was an act of acceptance and warmth. So, Peter was called on the carpet and had some explaining to do. He shared with the apostles a vision he had where a large sheet descended from heaven containing animals the Jews considered unclean. God told him to slaughter and eat, but Peter said, “No way God! Nothing unclean has ever entered my lips.” And God said to him, “What I have made clean, you must not call profane”. Then he heard the Spirit say, “Make no distinction between them and us.” To further drive home the point, Peter explained that while he was preaching, “The Spirit descended upon them, just as it had upon us. If God gave them the same Spirit when they believed in Jesus, who was I to hinder God?” When the others heard this, they were silenced. They praised God and said, “Then God has given, even to the Gentiles, the repentance that leads to life.”

Without the expansion of the Church to the Gentiles, we would not be here today. The church is continually faced with the challenge of being open to the world or turned in on itself. Is church about maintenance or mission? Perhaps both, yet, too often we get caught in the maintenance mode focusing on taking care of ourselves with little serious thought about reaching out to others. Like the early church, “gentiles” make us uncomfortable. Yet, Jesus commands us to reach out in love to others, especially those on the margins of society. That’s where he spent much of his time.

Pentecost can become a festival with little fanfare and too often the Holy Spirit becomes the forgotten person of the Trinity. Pentecost is primarily about mission. Without mission, the Holy Spirit makes little sense. We pull out a banner with a white dove on it, wear red on Pentecost Sunday and then what? Where is your faith calling you to reach out in mission to others? Who are the “gentiles” in your life that you are being challenged to accept? When have you been led by the Holy Spirit into places you would rather not go?

Our church is at mission when you invite others to come to services. Our church is at mission when you feel challenged to move out of your comfort zone. Our church is at mission when you find yourself becoming more compassionate. Our church is at mission when you feel the spiritual emptiness of your soul being stirred, when you go into your prayer corner desiring nothing but God, and when you kneel at the communion rail hungry for far more than bread. Our church is at mission in the many ways we reach out to the poor and marginalized. Our church is at mission when you find yourself, like the apostles in Acts 11, surprised by God, or at least, yearning to be surprised. Does God really have control over your life or do you have God all figured out?

~ Pastor Bob