

"Are You Closed in?"
Acts 10:1-16, 44-48

One of the first and beautiful actions of the Holy Spirit in the early church was the scattering of the "Good News," that demolished all barriers between people. The greatest barrier was the Jewish/Gentile obstacle.

The first church saw itself as the 'ekklesia,' the called-out ones. This was a reform movement within the Jewish faith. St. Peter understood his assignment to be to introduce as many Jews as possible to God, through message and miracles done through him as seen in Acts, chapter three.

Then, comically, God rocked St. Peter's boat in chapter ten. He is on the roof praying when he has an irresistible hunger for some pita bread with a goat spread. While waiting for his order, he has a culinary vision of a checkered table cloth filled with a variety of animals. Perhaps he thought he was experiencing a sunstroke, but then he heard God speak: "*Get up, Peter! Kill and eat!*"

The animals on the menu were of the kind no practicing Jew would eat. They were, however, Gentile staples. St. Peter gives his catechistic answer: "*No eating of non-kosher food,*" believing this is the correct response. Once again, God does God's shocking thing: "*What God has made clean, you must not call profane.*"

Visions are not for Jews only. Cornelius, the God-fearing Roman Centurion, also has a vision. His points toward St. Peter. One of the cool things about the Book of Acts, is that God works both sides of the street: the side of the witness and the side of the witnessed to.

It is necessary that we remember that it is not people who make things happen, as it is individuals who become a part of God's work in progress. This truth

will liberate us to witness to our faith without the sense of having to force anyone or obtain certain answers.

Although we are a part of a work in progress, that does not mean we lack initiative or are immune to risk. It would have been easier and safer for Cornelius to come to St. Peter's house. He was a Centurion; he could go when and where he pleases. God clearly positions the risk with St. Peter.

If you ponder church growth in the two generations before this present one, a period I call "Open the doors, and they will come," you will discover it was a unique time. American culture was such that the church had only to have the lights on and people came: friendliness, excellent music, children's and youth ministries, (remember the cupcakes under the bus seats?) and pretty good preaching.

But, it is clear that entrance into a church was at the initiative of the visitor. Programs of evangelism consisted mainly of visitation of people who had already attended the church. That era is gone. Risk has returned to the church big time.

Now, it is the vision, the mission of the local church to take the initiative and go outside church walls to a hurting and needy world. The local church cannot be content to compete with other local churches, for a consistently small and smaller group of people who come to us. The initiative and the risk are ours.

Here is the core of today's New Testament lesson. When St. Peter arrives at the home of Cornelius, the meal will not be kosher. Now, St. Peter could have demanded the food be kosher since all the people he meets are supposed to be like him, not vice versa, right? Hmm. I think I hear some church people talking: "*we do not have to change to attract people. They need to change to be like us.*"

The vision that St. Peter had, however, indicated the top priority of a missionary's job description: we must be multicultural and multilingual. St. Peter spoke the Gentile language, but his heritage of "be ye separate" conflicted him. As

"Followers of the Way" we are to be "in" the world but not "of" the world. So, what language do we need?

Do we need to learn a foreign language? Or do we need to understand the vernacular within our same language spoken by those in our community? Some of us speak "Christianese," a language not understood by those outside the church. Terms such as 'getting saved; justified and sanctified; fellowship; or redemption are not found in the unchurched lexicon.

What we need to learn about is our community's culture, and what changes do we need to make, to meet other people and share with them the good news of Jesus Christ? The initiative lies with us. To be truthful, it is easier to be a "whosoever will, may come" church. The trouble is, it introduces few to the Kingdom of God. Back to St. Peter. God didn't just want Cornelius, God wanted the whole family, including spouse, children, slaves, some soldiers and who knows who else!

With God there is always more going on than we can see. St. Pete discovers what is really at stake and preaches his first sermon to the Gentiles. The result? While he is still preaching the Holy Spirit descends upon everyone who heard the word. "*The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles . . .*" (vv. 44-45)

We are barrier-breakers! Who are daring, multilingual, multicultural people of faith who engage our world for Jesus. May it be so with you and me. Alleluia. Amen.