

May 5th, 2024

Acts 10:44-48 “When Jesus Interrupts”

“What does it take to get into this church anyway?” That’s not a phrase you hear much anymore. As I indicated last week, Protestant churches in the United States have been in a decline since about the late 1960s. It started with mainline churches, or what some folks call “steeple churches,” although in the 70s and 80s, there was an uptick in non-traditional churches, but even those started slumping in the late 90s. Church membership used to be a big deal for a lot of communities, and which church you belonged to often indicated your social status. Where you went to church was a lot like what kind of car you drove or where you played golf. Every town had a “status church.” It’s usually one of the oldest churches in town, or maybe even the first. It’s where a lot of the movers and shakers in town go to worship, and you could guarantee that these movers and shakers were on the board of directors and that they had quite a bit of say about what went on in the church. They lived by the golden rule – “He who has the gold makes the rules.” For the most part, the “status church” is sort of a relic of the past. *But ...* every now and then you run into a reminder of which church is “top dog” in town.

Speaking of which, when we moved here 16 years ago, we adopted a dog from the animal shelter and named him “Ninja” because he was a sneaky boy. If you weren’t careful, he’d find a way to escape and go exploring. The first time he

did this, we found him three days later living with a bunch of college students down the street. When we went over to retrieve him, one of the guys said, “Your dog sure likes rice and beer!” Back then, I was new in town and learning the ins and outs of where our church fit into the ecclesiastical pecking order. I discovered that the “it church” in town, as far as mainline steeple churches go, was a church whose name I will not mention, but it isn’t far from here. It definitely fits all the criteria of a “status church” I mentioned. Well one night we got a call from the police asking if we had a dog named “Ninja.” We said, “Yes, where did you find him?” The officer informed me that he was found at this status church trying to get in the front door. I said, “Good grief, even our dog would rather go to that church!”

“What does it take to get into this church anyway?” Some churches have very specific answers to that question, especially when it comes to how much is expected of their members as far as financial contributions are concerned. I know a few who require a certain percentage of their parishioners’ income to be considered a member in good standing. These churches usually have a committee that enforces these expectations. I wonder if they have a hard time finding people to be on this committee. There are other requirements that are more understandable because they relate to a church’s doctrine and traditions. For example, there may be a certain time, place, or method for how one must be baptized. Or you must agree to and recite a creed or sign a “statement of faith” that ensures you are in full

agreement with their particular theological views. Some churches believe that only men can be “official” members or serve in leadership roles. Then there are all the unwritten rules about how one should dress or whether people who have tattoos or piercings are welcome. It usually doesn’t take long for someone to figure out whether they belong or not. The church, whether it’s our intention or not, often subscribes to a “believe, behave, belong” model. But honestly, that makes sense. That’s how it works in so many non-church institutions and even some family systems. It’s a tried-and-true method as old as written history. But then along comes Jesus to interrupt the status quo and turn everything upside down.

Jesus modeled a backwards pattern of inviting people into leadership. He chose people with no prior training who were often on the margins or even outside the margins of the social structures of his time and place. He invited people into fellowship *before* beliefs or behavior were taught or tailored. No wonder he caught so much flack from the guardians of religious orthodoxy. They would say, “You can’t do that!” Jesus would say, “Oh yeah? Hold my chalice.” The best example of Jesus’ unorthodox method for choosing leaders was Peter. You might say, “Oh good grief, not Peter again! We spent most of Lenten season talking about Peter! Aren’t we done with him yet?” No, because his story did not end after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Remember, he was the rock on which the church was to be built. Let’s go to our

scripture this morning to see if Peter had what it takes to live up to Jesus' example.

The passage Barbara read requires a little background information for it to make sense, so I've got to recap chapter 9 and the first 43 verses of chapter 10. This all takes place in Judea not long after the death and resurrection of Christ. Peter is now the leader of a new Jewish sect of Jesus-followers that people nicknamed "Christians." This was meant to be a derogatory term. It means "little Christs," as in "Oh, look at those little Christs who believe that their failed Messiah is still with them. Bless their hearts." Peter, the leader of these little Christs is doing his best to fulfill Jesus' commission to "go into the world and proclaim the gospel." Then one day a Roman Centurion named Cornelius received a message from God to send his men to track down Peter and bring him back to his house in Capernaum. Cornelius was a Gentile, but he's described as "a devout man who feared God with all his household who gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God." In other words, he was a "seeker." He wasn't a member of a Christian community because he was a Gentile. At the time, the churches were all Jewish and operating under the Law of Moses which prohibited Gentiles from being a part of their religion. Apparently, Cornelius learned about Christians and was inspired by the way they lived out their faith and loved one another.

Meanwhile, Peter is staying with this tanner named Simon. Then he receives this bizarre vision from God about how God doesn't really care whether a person is a Jew or Gentile because in God's reign, all are welcome. Peter didn't get it. This was confusing to him because he was raised to believe that Gentiles were unclean, and that their customs were an abomination to God. So, God had to show Peter this vision two more times before he finally got it. But this is Peter we're talking about, right? He may be the leader of the Jesus movement now, but he's still a little slow when it comes to thinking outside the box. Then a bunch of men, most likely soldiers, show up at Simon the tanner's door to escort Peter back to Cornelius' house. God had told Peter ahead of time that this was going to happen, but I imagine Peter was still pretty nervous about entering the house of a Gentile who also happened to be a commander in the occupying army. Then when Peter arrives, Cornelius bows down and tries to worship Peter! Peter was like, "Shhhh ... no, don't do that ... this is awkward enough as it is." Then Cornelius says, "I had this vision and God told me to seek you out so I could understand what this Jesus movement is all about." Peter says, "Funny, God gave me a vision too and told me that I needed to tell you that Gentiles are welcome at God's table." Then Peter begins to teach everyone who was gathered at Cornelius' house about Jesus. Then all heaven breaks loose.

See, what's supposed to happen is that any Gentile who is interested in joining a church had to become a proselyte. Then they'd commit to a season of learning the behaviors of

the Jewish faith. They'd be required to modify their diets to keep kosher and learn all the purification rites and the laws of the Torah. Then they'd be required to publicly profess their belief in God and confess that Jesus, not Caesar, is their Lord. But that doesn't sound so bad, right? Like I said earlier, this "believe, behave, belong" was the standard for belonging to any institution. Here's the tricky part – After they did all these things, they'd have to be circumcised. Only then could they be baptized and considered "real" Christians. Can you see how that might be a problem? "What does it take to get into this church anyway?" Oooh. Really? I dunno. So when Peter arrives at Cornelius' house, he starts this process by introducing these Roman Gentiles to the truths of the Christian faith.

So now you have everything you need to know to understand what Barbara read. While Peter is teaching these Gentiles about Jesus and preparing them to start the process of conversion, the Holy Spirit rudely interrupts and just starts willy-nilly baptizing all of these Gentiles ... not with water but with the fire of the Holy Spirit. I can imagine Peter thinking, "Wait ... this is the final step in the process! What's going on? You don't start at step three, these people need to start at step one!" Meanwhile everyone is speaking in tongues and prophesying. Clearly these Gentiles have been adopted into God's family and fully blessed. To which Peter just sort of throws his hands up and says, "Well ... can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit? I guess not!" So Peter

baptizes them all and they invite Peter to stay for a while so he can fill them in on what they should do next as a new community of faith.

I'm trying to imagine a comparison for what this might feel like. Maybe it would be like a high school graduate who applies to a university and the admissions board calls back and says, "You're in!" But what about my SAT scores? "No need to worry about that." Aren't you going to ask about my grade point average? "No need. You wouldn't be applying here if you didn't want to be a student." What about references? "No, we're just happy that you showed interest in us. Welcome aboard! We'll give you all the tools you'll need to learn and grow and be successful." But wait, that doesn't seem fair!

Or maybe it would be like a college graduate out looking for a job at a Wall Street firm. "Welcome aboard! We're happy you applied. It looks like you have a degree in business economics. We'd love to have you on board as a broker." Really? I thought I'd need to start out with an internship first. "No. You can learn as you go." I thought I'd have to work in the mail room or some entry level position where I'd have to work 15-hour days just to earn the right to apply as a broker. "That's silly, why would we make someone who's trained to be a broker work in a mail room? That's a waste of talent! Come on in! Welcome aboard!"

Maybe it's more like an immigrant who comes to a country to be a citizen, and they're welcomed with open arms as soon as they step off the plane or train or boat or whatever the entry point is. Wait, don't I have to take a citizenship test? Don't I have to take an oath of allegiance? "No, when you enter this country we'll work with you and help you learn as you go. We're just happy that you chose us." What's going on?! This is so weird. It's so *backwards*.

Leave it to Jesus to take down the barriers. Leave it to Jesus to turn things upside down. Leave it to Jesus to say, "The last shall be first and the first shall be last." "Blessed is the one who makes peace." "Blessed is the one who is merciful for they will be shown mercy." That's not the way things work! No, that's *exactly* how it works in God's reign. It's the complete opposite of the old "believe, behave, and belong" model. And that's what we're seeing here. Jesus is telling people they belong, long before they behave or believe. Here's a question to take home with you today – If we in the church are Peter in this story, who are the Gentiles in our lives today? And how is our ordered way of faith helping or hindering their belonging in the Body of Christ? How would we answer the question, "How do you get into this church anyway?"