

“Be the Evidence”

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 9, 2021

Psalm 98 ~ Acts 10:44-48 ~ John 15:9-17

“God puts families together in many different ways.” You can’t imagine how many times I have said that. I am the mother of two adopted children who are eight years apart. We attended a lot of seminars when we adopted our first child, and each one stressed that we should tell our son that he was adopted right from the start. When he was about four our next-door neighbor was having a baby and he wanted to know what it was like when he was in my tummy. That’s the *first* time I ever said, “God put families together in many different way” and I told him how we became a family through adoption. He just nodded his head and went outside to play. I wasn’t quite convinced that he really understood but figured we would have other opportunities to discuss it when he brought it up again. He rarely ever did.

Now let’s fast forward about twelve years. By this time our daughter was just about the same age and she wanted to know the exact same thing, “Mama, what was it like when I was in your tummy?” I immediately responded, “Well, God puts families together in many different ways and this is how we became a family. She just nodded, and I patted myself on the back for having such astute children. A week didn’t pass before she asked again, “Mama, what was it like when I was in your tummy?” I repeated that “God puts families together in many different ways” and then spent a little more time talking about adoption. Surely, that would do the trick ... but no such luck.

By the time she was six I bet we had that same conversation a hundred times. She would listen but she just couldn’t get it...perhaps she just wouldn’t get it. After a while, John would just roll his eyes as if to say, “Oh please Mary Anne ... not the God puts families together in many different ways story”... but I was always hopeful that it would eventually sink in.

That same year, John and I made plans to spend a week in Paris. Our children were going to stay home with their grandparents; however, as the time drew closer, I realized that I really wanted to take them with us. So, at the last minute we made arrangements to expedite their passports. They were several forms for us to fill out and the secretary asked our daughter if she wanted to come into her office while we completed the paperwork. As they left the room, I heard her say to Mary Cate, “so your grandparents are taking you to Europe.” I explained that while we were old enough to be her grandparents that we were actually her parents. She looked

a little sheepish, but not nearly as shocked as she did when Mary Cate said, “Well, she’s really not my mom, but he might be my dad!”

Yes, God puts families together in many different ways. Long ago, God chose one people out of all the peoples of the world. They were the children of Abraham through Isaac ... through Jacob ... through Joseph. God made a covenant ... an intentional relationship freely entered by both sides ... with all of them and all their descendants to follow. This was the covenant promise: “I will be your God and you will be my people.”

What a birthright! It was a privilege to belong to the holy people of God. But with all the benefits and blessings ... a relationship such as that came with certain obligations and expectations. Among them were clear rules about avoiding contact with “those people” who were not part of the one true holy people of God. As much as possible, you avoided all contact with them. You kept yourself pure... uncontaminated ... disentangled from their evil ways.

Over the years God’s people often failed to live up to their end of the agreement. They broke the rules. They mixed with Gentiles. They worshiped Gentile gods. They adopted Gentile ways. They followed Gentile practices. They lived by Gentile values. And they paid the price. They lost their way. They lost their identity. One group of Gentiles after another marched through their land ... burned their cities ... and plundered their wealth – the Egyptians, the Syrians, the Assyrians, until finally, with the Babylonians, they even lost their land. They went into exile. They almost went into extinction.

When they came back from exile, they vowed to be pure this time and to avoid the evil Gentiles as much as possible. Some of them believed ... if they could only be pure enough ... if they could only be obedient enough ... they might finally be worthy of God sending them the Messiah, the perfect King, to lead them into their age of glory. How long they had waited ... how patient they had been still persecuted ... still abused by Gentile powers – the Persians, the Greeks, the Ptolemies, and now the ruthless, arrogant, imperialistic Romans,

Then, in the most unexpected moment ... in the most unexpected way, the Messiah came. Or so some of them believed. He was born to a poor family in Galilee. Nobody expected that. He was resisted and refused by their priest and rabbis, Nobody expected that. They turned him over to the Romans to be crucified. Well, you might expect that from the Romans, but nobody expected that God would let that happen to the Messiah ... not in a million years. But God did allow it and then God raised him from the dead. Nobody, and I mean nobody, expected that. Then he was gone again, but he sent his Spirit among them.

To understand our reading from the Book of Acts this morning we need to pick up the story in Acts 10:9. Simon Peter, fearless leader of the Messiah's closest friends, was praying on the rooftop of Simon Tanner about lunchtime, when God sent him a vision of all the forbidden ethnic foods that the Gentiles ate. Good kosher Jews like Peter avoided this food like the plague. "Dig in!" God told Peter, and Peter objected, "No way, Yahweh! You know I'm kosher. It goes against Torah." But God said, "Peter, don't call impure what I've called 'clean!'" This happened three times. Three times Peter saw the vision and resisted. Three times, God said, "Don't call 'impure' what I've called 'clean!'" This is the same Peter who denied Jesus three times ... the same Peter that Jesus asked three times if he loved him. I guess three is the magic number when it comes to Simon Peter.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door ... three men sent from Cornelius of Caesarea. Cornelius was a Gentile, not one of God's holy people. He was one of "those people." In fact, he was a Roman! In fact, he was a Roman soldier! In fact, he was a centurion ... a commanding officer of a hundred troops of the occupation. The three men told Peter that an angel had told Cornelius to send for him. So, Peter, the kosher Jew, went to Caesarea with his friends to the house of Cornelius. Peter told Cornelius, in a voice loud enough for all to hear, "You know I'm not supposed to be here. It's against our law, that is, it's against the Torah, the word of God, for me, a Jew, to be here with a Gentile like you. So why did you send for me?" And Cornelius told Peter that he had had this vision from God telling him to send for him. Finally, Peter got it! In verse 34. Peter said, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right." Then, he told Cornelius and all his household about Jesus, his cross, his resurrection.

But the big surprise comes in verse 44 ... that's the verse we heard this morning: "While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word" – meaning Cornelius and his whole household. That's right! Gentiles receive the Spirit of God's Messiah! Peter's friends couldn't believe their eyes and ears. Verse 45 says they were "astounded." But it was undeniable. The evidence was right there. They heard it in the way they talked. They saw it in the way they acted. The Spirit of Jesus had come upon Gentiles, too.

Truth be told, they didn't want to believe what they saw and heard. It was more than a surprise. It was a shock. Gentiles included among the holy people of God? It went against their scripture. It went against their history. It went against their expectations. It went against their beliefs. They didn't want their worst enemies to receive grace any more than we do. But they couldn't deny what they saw and heard. Peter asked, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" No answer was

reported. This question was met with silence. Nobody said a word. They couldn't say "yes," but they didn't want to say "no."

We should pause at that ... they certainly did! The Gentiles ... "those people" ... you and me ... are now adopted into the holy people of God. As 1st Peter 3:10 celebrates: "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." We don't deserve to be here. We have never deserved to be here. We have no claim to be included among God's own people. And we must never forget that whenever we're talking about who deserves to be welcomed into our holy spaces and who does not. Yes, God puts families together in many different ways, and God brought the Gentiles into the family.

Now I am wondering today, is it possible that we have become like those first century Jewish Christians in this story, assuming that we are God's beloved and "those people," however we define them ... are not? Do we believe that God does play favorites after all, and we are it? Or do we ask ourselves what Jesus would do?

A mother was making pancakes for her two sons, Tommy and Mark. The older boy was six and the younger four. The boys began to argue over who would get the first pancake. Mom saw the opportunity to teach a lesson. She told them, "If Jesus were sitting here, he would say, 'Let my brother have the first pancake. What do you think he would want you to do?'" The boys sat in stony silence. They knew the right answer. Then Tommy turned to his younger brother and said, "Mark, you be Jesus!"

I guess that's our impulse when it comes to loving the people that we don't like ... when it comes to including the people we prefer to exclude ... maybe because they excluded us first. Let somebody else be Jesus for a change. But no, Jesus says, "You be the evidence that my Spirit lives within you and among you. You show them by the way you speak and behave ... you show them by the way you love them that my Spirit dwells in you." How else will the world ever believe that it's true ... that Jesus, the Christ is risen and lives among a group of Gentiles like us at Oakland Christian UCC? Let the world believe it's true because they can see by the way we talk ... by the way we act ... and by the way we love ... that the Spirit of the risen Christ has fallen upon us.

May we pray?

Spirit of the living God, who plays no favorites, make us the evidence of your inclusive love. Fill us with your Spirit in these days. Let us live by your Spirit so that all people might see by the way we speak and the way we behave and the way we love that Christ is risen and dwells among us. Amen