

KEEPING UP WITH THE REDEMPTIVE ACTIVITY OF GOD

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A couple of weeks ago you may recall that the sermon was on John 10 in which Jesus talks about himself as being the good shepherd. Barbara Dunn sang a gorgeous solo about “the shepherd boy”. All three hymns were based on Psalm 23. Everything came together beautifully, I thought. As you were leaving the sanctuary, one of you thanked me for the sermon, but observed that there was part of the passage I had not dealt with that was a troublesome part of the text. I knew exactly which verse this person was referring to and, quite honestly, I was hoping that no one had noticed that I had not bothered to deal with it. It was a conscious decision on my part, perhaps a coward’s way out, but I had been busted. The verse was John 10:16 where Jesus says, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.”

Quite frankly, I’m not sure what to do with that verse. Does it simply refer to non-Jews, that is, Gentiles? Does it refer to non-Christians? Does it refer to life in some other universe? Or does it refer to something else? I don’t know. The problem for many persons is that it is in this same Gospel that Jesus tells his disciples that he is “the way, and the truth, and the life” and that “no one comes to the Father but by him” (14:6). Some Christians have taken that verse and run with it to say that anyone who does not believe that is forever lost.

But then we have to read any one part of Scripture together with everything else

we find in Scripture. Not only does Paul, for example, talk about how “for freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1) and how “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

Then we come to the text from Acts in which Peter preaches to the Gentiles. It is important to note that this sermon comes immediately after Peter’s encounter with Cornelius. You recall that this Cornelius, “a centurion of the Italian Cohort” and “a devout man who feared God” (Acts 10:1,2), had a vision in which God told him that he would receive a visit from a man called Peter. At the same time Peter had a vision in which he saw “all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air” on a four-cornered sheet that descended from the sky. In response to God’s command to eat, Peter resisted saying that he could not eat anything “profane or unclean” to which God said, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 10:11-15). Some of Cornelius’ men go to Peter and invite him to come to Cornelius’ home. Peter goes and, even though he had earlier refused to consider Gentiles worthy of receiving the gospel, he now welcomes Cornelius and his family into the Christian faith.

Now we get to Peter’s sermon in which he talks about Jesus and the Holy Spirit. At some point, apparently while Peter was still speaking, we are told that the Holy Spirit “fell upon all who heard the word” and Peter and his fellow-Jews, Luke says, “were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles” (10:45). Peter then says, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

Why do you suppose Peter and his fellow-Jews “were astounded” that the Holy

Spirit could, would, or did fall on their Gentile listeners? The answer, of course, is because they were not, apparently, expecting it – even though that was why they were there and why Peter was preaching. If God is full of surprises, those things are surprising to us only because of our blindness or inability to see beyond our own wants and fears.

Almost exactly 54 years ago, on May 19, 1964 the retiring moderator (Thomas W. Currie, Jr.) of what was then the Synod of Texas preached a sermon on this text that called for the Presbyterian Church to welcome African Americans into its fellowship as colleagues and fellow-believers, a notion that was not received by all with enthusiasm, given the racial tensions in this country at the time. The preacher said it was high time that the church try, as one scholar (Will Willimon) has put it, “to keep up with the redemptive activity of God” (***Acts***, Commentary in the ***Interpretation*** series; Westminster John Knox, p. 99). We can either insist on our own way, or we can try to keep up with the redemptive activity of God, as much as it may astound us and perhaps even disappoint our own sensibilities.

Peter and his colleagues were astounded because the Spirit was way ahead of them. Something similar happened in the town of Northampton, Massachusetts in 1734 and 1735 where Jonathan Edwards preached and the community experienced what became known as “the Great Awakening”, a series of revivals that led to conversions and a strengthening of the church. Edwards could attribute this phenomenon to nothing else but the work of the Spirit. Edwards and others were astounded, to use Luke’s word, at this turn of events.

There is, and perhaps always has been, this idea among many people that, as

believing Christians, they have the inside track on God's love and favor, and that, furthermore, those who don't believe as they do are misguided and wrong. Now, back to that verse in John 10 that causes heartburn for many people. While I don't have any problem with saying, "I don't know what the best way to interpret it is", I do know that God knows more than we do, and I do know that God is active in this world in ways that would surprise me and most people, and I do know that God's love and grace are bigger and broader than I can imagine, and I do know that I would probably be astounded by the breadth and depth of God's love for all people, including those of religious beliefs, languages, customs, and traditions that are different from our own.

That does not mean that I must relinquish my own convictions. I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that he is my Lord and Savior. I also believe that he is the Savior of the world. Having confessed that, I also have to say that, as a follower of Jesus, my job is precisely to do that – to follow him, to live and exhibit what I believe to be the characteristics of his kingdom, to try to love as he loved, to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love my neighbor as myself. My job is not to judge or condemn Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, or any other religious groups for what they believe, or even those who do not believe anything at all. We can disagree about important matters, but we can still respect each other. It is not merely a matter of tolerance; rather, it's a matter of respect. As right as I may be convinced that I am, neither you nor I am God, and we must leave such issues to God.

In addition, like Peter and his companions, we must be open to the work of the Spirit to surprise and astound us. I don't know what that would look like, but while I believe that Jesus Christ is the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, I also believe

that his Spirit is always going ahead of us, engaging in redemptive and reconciling work that will keep us wondering what God is up to. With open minds we, too, may be astounded – in a good way.

Thanks be to God!