Acts 10:44-48 1 John 5:1-6

Psalm 98 John 15:9-17

What makes a person a Christian? We often start with belief. Someone confesses faith in Jesus, then learns what is expected of his or her behavior as a Christian, and finally the person finds belonging in a community with other Christians. The process has been pretty much the same, whether it is someone who has “found the Lord” and wants to profess their faith to join a church, or someone who grew up in the church and eventually professes their faith to join the church. But Jesus didn’t work that way. In Christ we all belong, regardless of belief or behavior. This may comfort some and unsettle others. When churches began to include African Americans, that comforted some and unsettled others. When the church allowed women to be ordained, that comforted some and unsettled others. When churches help and give aid to undocumented immigrants, that comforts some and unsettles others. Our story today from the Acts of the Apostles was a time when Peter learned that the Gentiles belonged to God, an evetn that unsettled him.

The events Peter gets caught up in don’t follow the way things had been done. As a disciple and a leader of the Jerusalem headquarters of the new Jewish sect known as Christians, he hears the voice of God calling him to go to the home of a Roman centurion in the city of Capernaum. Not only is it improper to enter the home of a Gentile; this particular Gentile is a commander in the occupying army. Peter doesn’t know what to think, but he obeys the voice and enters Cornelius’s home and begins to teach the gathered outsiders about Jesus. Then all heaven breaks loose.

You see, this was the way things were supposed to happen. Gentiles who ae interested in joining the family of God, the Jews, first become proselytes: then they commit to a season of learning the behaviors of the faith—modifying their diets to keep kosher, learning purification rites and all the other laws of the Torah—and professing their belief in God or, in the case of new Christians, faith in Jesus as Lord. Finally, they are baptized in water as a sign and seal of their new identity. Ever since Pentecost, Peter and the other disciples have come to understand that there is another layer in this conversion experience: baptism in the Holy Spirit, being filled with the very presence of Christ. That is how it is supposed to happen.

Peter would have made a good Presbyterian. One motto of the Presbyterian Church is that we do things “decently and in order.” That is not just a Presbyterian phrase for it is from the Bible. Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, admonished them that “all things should be done decently and in order.” Presbyterians love the *Book of Order*, the constitution of the Presbyterian Church—well, at least some of us do. Peter was one who went by the book, and so he found himself in a challenging situation. However, at the same, time, he was open to the work of the Holy Spirit. Because we like doing things decently and in order, this story is challenging for us as Presbyterians. It may unsettle us.

Peter starts the process decently and in order. He introduces these Roman Gentiles to the truths of the faith. He is following this order of believe and behave, then belong. But just as Peter is starting the process, the Spirit of Christ rudely interrupts and, willy-nilly, the Spirit just starts baptizing all these Gentiles. The final step! They are speaking in tongues and prophesying and clearly have been adopted and filled and blessed by God. The Holy Spirit did not even seek permission from the Session to have these Gentiles baptized with the Holy Spirit. In our system, session must approve baptism. The Holy Spirit ignored the*Book of Order.* Peter asks, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit?” I guess not. Peter got the message that more people belong to God than he ever imagined and God shows these people they belong ignoring humanity’s decently and in order!

Think of it another way. Imagine a room full of immigrants, starting the process of gaining U.S. citizenship. It is a long process with all kinds of bureaucratic red tape, classes, and a citizenship test. Yet it is well worth it to become a citizen of the United States. Suddenly, you are visited by the highest judge in the land who begins shaking your hands and conferring upon all of you the right and privileges as naturalized citizens. You haven’t studied, taken the citizenship test, and said their oath of allegiance. But you are now a citizen! Everyone is celebrating and congratulating each other.

Can you imagine the stir that would create, especially with such a strong anti-immigrant stance in our nation? These immigrants declared citizens without going through the legal process. It wasn’t done by the book. It is just as unsettling for the church. Jesus is turning things upside down again. Telling people they belong, long before they believe and behave.

The church has for centuries declared who belongs and who doesn’t, who is in and who is out. Many in the church are recognizing that just like with Peter, the Holy Spirit is working to tear down the barriers. Is it not interesting that an apostle as devout as Peter is presented with another opportunity to learn something new concerning the divine persistence on behalf of people we exclude? Salvation includes the foreigners, and the good news is that they are to be included in the new Israel of God. God’s love for the outsider is made clear! It comforts some and unsettles others.

Lutheran pastor Barbara Lundblad describes a church she served for many years. It was a merger of two congregations. One church was founded in Harlem in 1896. By the mid-1920s the congregation had left their building behind and moved north. Why? Because African Americans from the South began moving in after the First World War. The Gentiles were coming! The congregation’s decision was shaped by racism and by a desire for good order: we do not want to change how we worship, we do not know how to welcome people who are not like us, we need to stay Lutheran and not become Baptists or Pentecostals. One anniversary brochure included this unapologetic statement: “It became necessary for us to abandon the neighborhood where we had grown to over one thousand souls.” It unsettles people!

It can be unsettling. The last line of the story give us a clue as to how we can be open to work of the Spirit that breaks down the barriers and declares people belong to God. “Then they invited [Peter] to stay for several more days.” The inclusion of the Gentiles is not a reluctant, perfunctory toleration of the new group; full inclusion implies getting to know them, hearing their stories, accepting hospitality from them in their homes, sharing the same table.

All authority and power and dominion

to the name that is above all names—

Jesus Christ our Lord—

now and in the age to come. Amen.