

Acts 10:44-48

Two Miracles

Last Sunday afternoon in Columbus, the Council on American-Islamic Relations helped sponsor an interfaith march down on Broad Street, a chance to build friendship and understanding between people of different faith traditions.

I was unable to attend, largely because I wanted to be present at the Delaware Community Coalition 5th Sunday service, at which people from several different Delaware churches gathered for worship.

Both of these efforts were attempts by people of goodwill to get together and talk across divides to promote stronger communities. For a Christian, both of these efforts are justified by the command to love our neighbor, or in the case of the ecumenical relationships, the command to love one another, our brothers and sisters in Christ, and also by the imperative to bear witness to our faith, and if I might add, the texts that we have read in worship these last two Sundays also provide biblical justification.

Last week the focus of worship was the “Ethiopian Eunuch,” who was found by Philip on the road to Egypt reading and trying to understand the book of Isaiah. This week our text is also from Acts and is also challenging in a similar way, because it comes from the encounter between Peter and the Roman soldier Cornelius. For Peter and Cornelius, the principle

cultural divide of their time and place was between Jew and Gentile, and rarely was there common ground on which to meet.

Peter and Cornelius

The story goes like this. Jewish people were forbidden from fellowship with Gentiles because they were considered unclean. I can only imagine the reasons why Gentiles may have been forbidden contact with Jews.

A man in Caesaria named Cornelius, who was what they called a “god-fearer,” which means that he was interested in Judaism but did not want to make a full conversion by submitting to circumcision, had a vision in which he was told to send for a man named Peter, who was in Joppa about 36 miles away.

About the same time Peter went up on the roof of the house where he was staying to pray. He fell into a trance and saw a vision in which he was told to eat forbidden (non-kosher) food.

He objected by saying, “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” The voice in the vision replied, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” When the vision was over, the men sent from Caesaria and Cornelius arrived. Peter, following the guidance of the Spirit, went with them.

When they met, Peter said these words, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right. He then shared the gospel story about Jesus.

“We are witnesses, “ he said, “of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree but God raised him on the 3rd day and caused him to be seen . . . He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed to judge the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives the forgiveness of sins through his name.”

### The Holy Spirit

Once again, as with Philip in last week’s message, we find a mysterious set of circumstances that may either be coincidence or Providence, accidental or divinely guided. Peter and Cornelius had their visions at just the right time so that they would meet, and when they encountered each other, they would find common ground; Peter would be open to sharing a previously forbidden meal and Cornelius would be open to Peter’s message and willing to embrace faith in Jesus Christ.

The early Christians were convinced, as are we, that these encounters are not well-explained by the idea of coincidence or accident, or happenstance, but are the

result of God’s direction, God’s action, the movement of the Holy Spirit.

As we move through this season of Easter, we think about the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, which is merely two weeks away now. Our experience is not always as dramatic as Philip’s or Peter’s, but we nonetheless find the same Spirit at work in us and in our midst, opening our minds and preparing our hearts to meet on common ground with people whom, if not forbidden to us previously, are at least people unlikely to be chosen by us to meet because they are outside our comfort zone.

It is in the spirit of Philip and the Eunuch, Peter and Cornelius that Christian people dare to reach out across denominational lines to meet people whose expressions of faith in Christ are different from our own, or across interfaith lines to meet people whose faith falls along other lines completely. God does not play favorites and did not make unclean people.

In my tradition, we made it a point to invite people to embrace faith in Jesus Christ each time we met. I hope you all know that the invitation is always open. The miracle that draws people towards faith in Jesus is always at work, though it is not a condition of friendship.

## Sometimes the Miracles

Then the miracles happened, as they sometimes do. The Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius and his household and they all spoke in tongues, which was for them the clear affirmation of the presence of the Spirit, convincing Peter and those with him of the authenticity of their experience. “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water, they have received the Spirit?”

There are really two miracles that took place that day. The first is the willingness of Cornelius to embrace faith in Jesus Christ.

The other miracle happened to Peter, who up until that time would have been very unwilling to meet with a Gentile like Cornelius, even at a distance. It would have been a matter of principle to keep his distance. Peter was opened when he had been closed. The experience of the vision and the encounter with Cornelius had transformed his understanding of God, it made it bigger.

Sometimes these miracles happen. *We* do not make them happen nor are we responsible for them, but we are meant to follow where the Spirit leads.

## Today's World

We live in the information age, in which we can meet across great distances with people who do not share our life experiences. Anyone with a “device” can find an audience, make any “truth” claim they desire, and to any audience that will listen.

There is trouble in this world that access to information is not solving. Sometimes ignorance is the problem and knowledge can help, but when it comes to sin, access to information is not enough.

Anger, greed and desire, fear, still characterize relationships between people and often face-to-face meetings only make things worse. But here in these stories we find the biblical principle that we should dare to such meetings when we can because the Spirit of God works miracles of peace and understanding, of faith where there was none, and of divine love shared across the divided spaces.

We should be willing to meet others in the open space where these great miracles have been known to happen, the two miracles of faith and friendship. When they do, and they will, then our lives are enriched, the magnitude of the world's problems is diminished, and God is glorified.

[Back](#)[Home](#)