



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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“Let the Church Rise”

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Acts 6:8-15; 7:54-60; 10:1ff

INTROUCTION

The STORY is told of a wealthy landowner who had a prize-winning horse...horse ran away... neighbors and townspeople said “too bad”. *“Maybe, maybe not.”* Few days later, horse came back and brought two others with it...everybody said, “Isn’t that great”. *“We’ll see.”* Couple days later, the man’s son was training the two new horses...things got a little out of control and one horse knocked him down...broke his arm. “Isn’t that awful?” *“Maybe. Let’s wait and see.”* Not long after, country went to war and all the able-bodied men were called into the service of the country, but this young man was exempted due to his injury.

It seems like one thing leads to another to another—not always to what you expect. The stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, led to some unexpected outcomes: Persecution broke out . . .then the believers scattered. . .then the Gospel started to spread beyond Jerusalem.

We saw last week: Great gift of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost...accompanying signs ...rapid growth of the church...and the remarkable (almost idyllic) life of the church in those early days. That all gave way to persecution and the scattering of early Christians out of Jerusalem to the north-east-south-west. One thing just seemed to lead to another to another.

It all started with the stoning of Stephen in **Acts 7**.

The very first verse in **Acts 8**: *“And Saul (later Paul) was there, giving approval of his death.”* What did this lead to? *“On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria”* (still v. 1).

It got worse before it got better. The persecution forced the believers out of their homes in Jerusalem...BUT...along with them went the Gospel. *“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went”* (v. 4).

By the time we get to **Acts 9**, *“Saul is still breathing murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples”* (v. 1). However, Saul had been pricked in his conscience while he was participating in Stephen’s stoning; he had heard Stephen’s message. Now he is dramatically converted on his way to Damascus [NORTH].

Meanwhile, PETER is busy preaching to the WEST of Jerusalem, and lands in Joppa (a coastal village on the Mediterranean Sea). That brings us to **Acts 10**.

What happens next is pivotal—for US. If it wasn’t for Acts 10, Dexter UMC wouldn’t be here; you & I would be here. Xty. might have remained a tiny minority sect within the Jewish religion instead of the mighty world-wide force it did become. That’s the significance of the events we have before us this morning.

It was Jesus’ intention—and command—for the Gospel to be proclaimed in ever-widening circles starting in Jerusalem, then *“in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”*. But it had gotten stuck in the Jewish world in Jerusalem—that is, until the persecution broke out.

We say: “Oh, the persecution! What a bad thing!” God says: “Hold on! Let’s see where I take this.” One thing leads to another. The very opposition of the enemy that was supposed to shut down the church actually helped prevent the church from drifting into oblivion.

How did that happen? Let’s go to **Acts 10**. It’s a drama “act” that unfolds in three scenes.

SCENE ONE

First we meet Cornelius, a Roman centurion...a high ranking man in the Roman army...part of the occupying force in Israel at that time. He is not Jewish. But, Cornelius and his whole family are “*devout and God-fearing*”. We’re told that “*he gave generously to those in need and prayed regularly*” (v. 2). He’s one of those types you run into every once in awhile who seems to have more “fruit” in their lives than some of the saints?

Here it is 3:00 in the afternoon, and Cornelius is praying. An angel appears to him with a message from God. Of course, he’s terrified. But I love the way the angel begins his message:

“*Cornelius, your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God*” (v. 4).

The angel gives Cornelius a command: “*Send servants to Joppa (i.e.: a little town about 30 miles NW of Jerusalem that sits right on the Mediterranean Sea). Have them find a man named Simon who is called Peter—he’s staying with Simon, the tanner in a house down by the sea*” (vv. 5-6). Cornelius complies. The stage is set. End of Scene One.

SCENE TWO

The setting is the house of Simon the Tanner by the sea in Joppa. It’s midday. Peter, the Apostle, is up on the roof praying as lunch is being prepared. He’s getting pretty hungry. Falls into a trance, and v. 11 says that: “*He saw heaven open and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’*”

It would be like looking at a huge poster with all kinds of animals on it: cats-dogs-owls-pandas-lizards-snakes-sparrows-worms-spiders-etc. How revolting to think about eating any of those. But that gives you a sense of what Peter must have been feeling during that vision.

Peter had been a “good Jew” all his life. He had maintained a strict division between “clean” and “unclean” foods (cf. Leviticus 11). Many animals were declared “unclean” and it had been drummed into Peter from childhood that to even touch the carcass of an unclean animal was to become unclean yourself.

So you can understand why Peter was appalled by the command in the vision. But the voice that was speaking to Peter said: “*Do not call anything God has made unclean*” (v. 15). You know, nothing God has made is unholy; it’s how we use what He has made...what He has given us.

ILLUSTRATION> I’m thinking back to my days in addictions counseling. Kids love to use a similar line about Marijuana: “God made it. It’s a natural plant. He must’ve meant it to be smoked.” I would say, “But not if it harms your body-mind-emotions.”

Well, to get the point across, the “voice” that had been speaking had to run it by Peter three times! He’s still pondering and wrestling with the meaning when at just that moment three Gentile visitors show up. Perfect timing!

Peter starts to understand that God isn’t so much interested in changing his diet (i.e.: it’s not animals at issue here). . .but changing the way he views people (especially people who are not like him; who may have, among other things, different dietary habits than him). With further promptings from the Holy Spirit, he comes to understand that he must overcome his deeply rooted prejudices and no longer consider the Gentiles (non-Jews) to be beyond the pale.

And he does. He graciously welcomes the strangers into his house to be his guests (in v. 23).

Let me ask you: Who in the world would you least like to have walk through those doors this morning? Think about those you are at odds with politically, ethnically, culturally. . .people with whom you have zero in common...who are repulsive to you...no love or respect for.

Do you know, no nationality or race or class is beyond God's call. No terrorist or murderer or pedophile or drug addict is beyond His grace. And who's going to tell or invite them if not us? Would you ever go out of your comfort zone, like Peter did (e.g.: to invite...to sit with...to share Christ with...to share a simple meal with)?

ILLUSTRATION> I'll never forget being in a church where I saw this beautifully portrayed—the **Church of the Messiah** on the east side of Detroit (near Belle Isle). I attended a few of their services years ago and saw gathered there PhD's...mentally handicapped...well-to-do...raggedy street people...young hippie-types...well-dressed young professionals...black-white-hispanic-Asian. It became my dream for the church. It still is.

I know we're pretty lily white here this morning. But there are still plenty of people all around us who are "not like us". I wonder if God could be calling us to reach out and invite and welcome them in (e.g.: residents of Alpha House)? I know they say, "*Birds of a feather flock together*"—but NOT in the Church of Jesus Christ!

SCENE THREE

We're back at Cornelius' house in Caesarea...a couple days have passed. Peter and some other Christians have journeyed from Joppa. Cornelius, still hungering in his heart for spiritual truth, has gathered his whole family and some friends to hear what Peter has to say. He greets Peter and takes him into the house where "a large gathering of people" are assembled.

Peter begins with a word of admission. He explains that it's against Jewish law to associate with a Gentile. But God had shown him not to call any man impure or unclean.

He proceeds to explain to people who would be hearing the Good News of Jesus Christ for the very first time. He presents the same message + the same invitation as in Jewish settings. The Holy Spirit came upon them before he even finished, and they were praising God and speaking in other languages.

Another experience of Pentecost!

The scene ends with a whole bunch of new believers being baptized. . .and Peter staying a few days to disciple and instruct them. How far Peter has come in just 48 hours. That leads me to a couple observations.

Two men 30 miles apart—yet worlds apart. God brought them together. The Holy Spirit fell on Peter so he could speak. . .on Cornelius so he could hear. God wanted to change both men.

Did you happen to note that Peter was staying in JOPPA—the very city JONAH was living in when God called him to go to the Ninevites (i.e.: people not like him; people he detested). **Jonah 1:3** tells us that "*Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship headed for that port.*"

Thank goodness, Peter didn't run from the Lord. And Jonah got his head on straight and came back around to doing what the Lord asked him to do.

Which man do you identify with this morning?

- **Cornelius:** Thinking that by living a good clean life, helping the poor, praying (et.al.) → you'll please God and receive eternal life? Do you know that no matter how good you are, you'll never be good enough or do enough to earn God's favor? It isn't that He doesn't love you. He does—beyond what you

can imagine! That's why He sent Jesus. If your faith is set squarely on Jesus Christ this morning, you can know where you will spend eternity.

- **Peter:** God may be trying to get you to change your thinking about some things. Do you know that out of His kindness and love, God wants all people (no matter what their back-ground is or what their religion is) to have a chance to hear about Jesus and enter a saving relationship with Him. Could it be that God is calling you out of your comfort zone to have a part in that (e.g.: directly or indirectly)?

CONCLUSION

I want to come back to Stephen for just a moment. After all, he's the one that got this whole chain reaction going. Remember, one thing kept leading to another: Stoning → Persecution → Scattering → Outsiders like Cornelius becoming Christ-followers.

You know, this was a time when the followers of Jesus Christ were being persecuted for their faith. It cost something to name His name, to be identified with him. It has never been "popular" to be a Christian. It is getting even less so these days:

- In some schools, a teacher can't wear a cross as jewelry.
- Nativity scenes are banned in many communities (thankfully not in Dexter). . . "Merry Christmas" is dumbed down to "Happy Holidays".
- There's the move to take "In God we trust" off our coins. . . "under God" out of the Pledge of Allegiance.
- Our faith, our beliefs, our moral stances are coming under attack and being denigrated.

Ques.: *Does any of that bother you?*

If you were in a situation where you'd be called upon to take a stand, would you?

Comes down to this: *How essential, how important is your faith? Is it the rock upon which you build your life, or is it something you fit into your life as you have time?*

If you exhibit a whole-hearted passionate love for God, chances are people will take notice. You may even feel some heat.

If no one is noticing your faith, I wonder, is it too well-hidden? Of course we don't talk about our faith just to antagonize folks or to intentionally draw fire or to be obnoxious. But we are to be SALT + LIGHT. This is no time to take cover.

My message to you this morning is: **LET THE CHURCH RISE!** Let the world know that "we are alive, we are filled with His glorious light". Let the world see us "moving with power, moving with compassion to bring His name to the earth".

Don't let the fire go out before you die—as it does in most American Christianity.

CLOSING

There's the STORY that when Jesus ascended into heaven after his mission on earth, there was this dialogue between Jesus and some angels:

Angels: "Did you accomplish everything you set out to do?"

Jesus: "Yes, all is finished."

Angels: "Well then, has the whole world heard of you?"

Jesus: "No."

Angels: "Then what is your plan?"

Jesus: "I have left 12 men and some other followers to carry the message to the whole world.

Angels looked at each other: "Is there a Plan B?" ☺

Church, there is no *Plan B*. God sent Peter to help that Gentile/Roman soldier learn the true way to heaven. Today, he is sending us to every person on the face of this earth, no matter who they are, so that they also

might find the peace that they are looking for in their lives. May you be-come a tool in the hands of God—through which He blesses and changes the hearts of many. AMEN!!!

STUDY GUIDE: Acts 12-16

Monday: Read Acts 12. What is the irony of the situation in vv. 13-15? How much faith do the Jerusalem believers exhibit in their prayer? How does this relate to v. 2? How are you like the people at the prayer meeting? What are some of your prayers that you'd be surprised if God answered? Why? Have you ever had people who supported you turn against you because of your faith? What were the circumstances? Did this increase or decrease your faith? Why?

Tuesday: Read Acts 13. What locations are listed in vv. 4-6? Locate them on a map. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in this new expansion of the church? What is the role of the church? What new places are mentioned in vv. 13-14? What is Paul's ministry strategy here? Why does John leave Paul and Barnabas in Perga? What for Paul is the culmination of the history of God's actions in Israel? How do each of the people he has mentioned point to this culmination? How does Paul's message compare with Peter's in ch. 2 and Stephen's in ch. 7? What kind of positive response does Paul's sermon generate (vv. 42-44)? What kind of negative response (v. 45)?

Wednesday: Read Acts 14. This chapter chronicles the first missionary journey. Locate Iconium on a map. How does their experience in Iconium differ from their experience in Pisidian Antioch (13:13-52)? What characterizes their ministry here? Locate Lystra on a map. What is the result of the lame man's faith? What effect does this have on the crowd! Was this the effect Paul hoped for? Where is Derbe? How are the results of the ministry there different from anywhere else? Why do you think Paul and Barnabas return to the very cities in which they were opposed and persecuted? What does this say about the importance of follow-up in ministry?

Thursday: Read Acts 15. How would you describe the relations between Jews and Gentiles during this period of history? Read Matthew 20:1-16. What parallels do you see between this parable and the dispute in this passage? What is Paul's background (cf. Acts 26:5)? What is Peter's position in the early church? Who is James (cf. Gal. 1:19)? What is James' importance in the Jerusalem church? What arguments do each of these men use to state their position? From the debate, the resulting letter, and the way in which it was delivered, what do you learn about the way to solve disagreements among Christians? How is your style of handling disagreements similar to the way the issue was handled in ch. 15?

Friday: Read Acts 16. From vv. 6-10, how involved is God in directing this missionary journey? When has God closed a door in your life? What happened? How does God usually speak to you? What are God's part, Paul's part, and Lydia's part in her conversion (vv. 11-15)? In vv. 16ff, why do you suppose that Timothy and Luke are treated differently than Paul and Silas (v. 1)? Which do you find most surprising—Paul and Silas' actions in v. 25 or their actions in v. 28? Why do you think these actions have such a great effect on the jailer? What does this say about the power of God to work in difficult situations?