

Acts 10:44-48

May 10 and 17, 2009

South Plains

Partners In The Gospel

When Pat Valentine and Kip Riddle first talked with me about a partnership between South Plains Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church of Grenada, my reaction was, "How bizarre and surprising! How random to think about two small churches, thousands of miles and an ocean apart, connecting with each other." But, what seemed at first like a series of odd coincidences quickly escalated into holy coincidences or the providence of God. God has brought us together and we at South Plains rejoice in that blessing.

Now, the challenge is for us to discover together, "What does it mean, practically speaking, for our churches to be partners in the gospel?" Then I read the lectionary passages assigned for May 10 and May 17, and another coincidence appeared: Those passages from the Acts of the Apostles describe two very different cultures brought together by the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore it seemed good to start with scripture as I looked for guidance about our partnership.

Acts 10:44-48 is the conclusion of a critical meeting between Peter and the Gentile household of a Roman centurion named Cornelius. Cornelius lived and worked as an officer in the Roman army in Caesarea, a

town on the Mediterranean coast. He was what the Jews called a God-fearer. In other words, he was a good man who practiced Judaism because he believed in God. But, he had an asterisk by his name, because Cornelius was a Gentile, uncircumcised and unclean according to Jewish law. So, he was respected, but not admitted to the inner courts of the temple in Jerusalem, and never welcome at table fellowship with practicing Jews. In this story Cornelius was at prayer one day when an angel appears to him and tells him to send men to Joppa to find a fellow called Peter.

Cornelius, because he was a God-fearing man, did as he was told. While his men were traveling the 40 miles to Joppa, Peter also had a vision. In his vision, Peter is offered food that was obviously classified as unclean according to Jewish law; and he refuses to eat it. Three times, the food is offered and each time a voice from heaven warns, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Peter cannot understand why God would offer something unclean to him. While he is puzzling over this vision, the Spirit tells him to answer the door and to go with the men who have come to see him.

So, Peter goes to meet Cornelius, and he tells the whole household the story of Jesus Christ: his message, his death, and his resurrection as the fulfillment of the Jewish scriptures that Cornelius knew well. The conclusion of Peter's sermon is in verse 43: "Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." That's the climax of the sermon. Then, as if

on cue, the Holy Spirit falls on everyone in that Gentile household. The evidence for the Spirit is a Pentecostal experience, similar to what the Apostles had in Acts 2. It astounds the Jews who are there. In a flash, Peter understands what his vision meant: God has made these Gentiles clean. Peter makes what may be the fastest decision on record for the church. He says, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

The Gentiles are baptized. And, that is a giant step for Peter and the other apostles. We can scarce imagine what a cataclysmic change that represented for a bunch of Jews who had heard Jesus say that he did not come to overturn the law, but to fulfill it. The Jewish law was clear that believers should not sit at table with a Gentile. That separation is what made Jews stand out from Romans, Greeks and other foreigners. They didn't eat with unbelievers. Now, Peter has come to the conclusion that someone who is not a Jew, who is not circumcised and will never be a Jew, this person can be baptized as a Christian. This is the same tremendous divide that the Apostle Paul will cross. It is the single most important step in the spread of Christianity throughout the ancient world. Without opening the church to Gentiles, the Christian faith would still be a sect, an isolated splinter group within Judaism.

Today, we take it for granted that the church is worldwide. Or in the words of Jesus, that we are "witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and

to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8)." But, we may forget that we are worldwide only because of God's provision, because the power of the Holy Spirit crossed national boundaries, racial prejudices, and cultural differences.

At the end of this story is one sentence that provided me with the jumping off point for this sermon: "Then they invited him (Peter) to stay for several days." What was it like for Peter, a good Jew, to live with Gentile Cornelius for several days? It's one thing for God to declare that the barriers separating Jews and Gentiles have been removed in God's mind. It's another thing for real people to cross those barriers in weekly worship and in the life of the church. Theoretically, partnership is easy. Practically, it takes hard work.

So, the question swirling around my head is this: what does it mean for South Plains and Grenada Presbyterians to cross those barriers in a meaningful way, in a way that makes us partners not only in God's mind but week in and week out in the life of the church? New Testament Christians discovered some answers when Cornelius invited Peter to stay for several days. We began to discover answers when Pastor Osbert James stayed in Virginia. And, we will continue that discovery as I visit you. Of course we have one advantage over Peter: we are all Gentiles. We are all 'Johnny come lately' Christians.

In order to help the process of learning about partnership, I want to offer a thumbnail sketch of South

Plains as I see it; and I want to bring to South Plains a thumbnail sketch of Grenada Presbyterians.

Physically, South Plains is a country church. The bricks in its walls were made from the red clay of central Virginia. Two horses gallop across the pasture next door. Walking out the front of our sanctuary, we see the Southwest Mountains which separate us from Charlottesville, Virginia, seven miles away. Like many country churches, we've been here a long time, 190 years.

The New Testament word for church, *ecclesia*, means a gathered assembly. Some might call South Plains a commuter church because people are gathered from as far as fifteen miles away, and very few of our members could walk to church. For that reason, we believe God calls people to South Plains, sometimes because we're convenient, but more often because God wants them here. But, why?

Well, the letter to the Ephesians expresses the hope that all of us will come to unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, and to maturity. We are a "mature" congregation, at least in the sense that we have a lot of gray heads, including my own. But, we have also been blessed with many who are mature in the sense that they bring the gift of experience in Christ's church. That kind of maturity has proven invaluable in our teaching ministry, our service to others in need, and our worship. We would not be ready to build Kirk Hall without

that experienced leadership among our elders and people.

At the risk of seeming to boast, I will say that we are a grace-filled congregation. We have members with first-hand experience in receiving forgiveness and forgiving others. Time and again we have seen our weaknesses made perfect by God's grace. Perhaps that explains our unity, the willingness to listen to each other. As a result, we are by and large a grateful people who remember that we have received more than we deserve. Our programs are outward oriented with aid to homeless people in the surrounding area and assistance to victims of hurricanes, storms and tsunamis. That's why we are thrilled to help with your building fund.

Finally, South Plains has a long tradition of dreaming, just like the Apostle Peter, and just like Cornelius. Twenty-five years ago, some of our members had a vision of an expanded ministry with a new building that would include bathrooms and a fellowship hall. It has taken that long, twenty-five years, to get ready to build. Perhaps for that reason, South Plains can empathize with the challenge facing Grenada Presbyterians as you attempt to re-build from hurricane Ivan. Dreams keep us hopeful, and hope builds faith, the first step in fulfilling God's mission.

That's my thumbnail sketch of the church I serve. I'm sure I left out many things. However, the most important characteristic of South Plains is one I believe

we share with Grenada. We both know the power of the Holy Spirit at work. The evidence in our case is not the gift of tongues, although like Peter we have been blessed to hear people from other cultures speaking about Jesus Christ in words we can understand. The evidence is the barriers God has overcome to bring us to this place.

The biggest barrier is hopelessness. There was a time when some people looked at the tiny membership of South Plains and shook their heads. There were Presbyterians in 1980 who said, "Why don't they just give up and close the church?" But, God had other plans for us. Slowly, God began calling people to worship and study God's word and witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Just last month, a neighbor said it won't last. The church will grow today and wither tomorrow. But, God has other plans for South Plains and for Grenada.

Peter and Cornelius were surprised when God made them partners. The surprises continue. The power of the Holy Spirit does some strange and wonderful things. You and I better get ready to be surprised. Because God has just begun to work.