

## God's Love Should Come As No Surprise

In past sermons and reflections, we talked about how we have been surprised by different things or events. Our careers have taken a different turn and we've found ourselves in strange places, i.e., The Home Depot or the United Church of Christ. I have shared a few times that I feel that my current situation is one of the biggest surprises of my life. All of us have been surprised by a turn of events, health situations, a happy occasion, and even a turn on the stage.

Surprises also happen in our Sacred Scripture. The whole reading from the Acts of the Apostles would have left the early hearers with their mouths opened widely. Once Peter had his conversion experience after the Pentecost event, he freely spoke of Jesus Christ crucified and raised from the dead. Paul had also come on the scene and had spread the message of Christ. Peter and Paul had reached an agreement that Peter should preach to the Jewish people while Paul should preach to the Gentiles. Remember, a Gentile is anyone who is NOT a Jew. Surprise? Let's take a deep dive into the reading from the Acts of the Apostles.

Peter is in the house of Cornelius, who was a Roman soldier. Right away, this sets off a bunch of red lights for the early Christians who were from the Jewish tradition. They would *never* associate with the Romans. The early Christian Jews were still coming to terms with the fact that they would “break bread” with the Gentiles, let alone the Romans who had made their lives miserable. Remember, they even had a hard time with Jewish people from Samaria. Now, Peter is asking them to baptize members of the house of Cornelius and other Romans.

Their reactions could be much the same as if someone told us to take in someone who had persecuted us or had made our lives miserable, even to the point of leaving us penniless and homeless. Peter looks at them and says, “How can we not baptize them? The Holy Spirit has spoken.” We can say, “How can we keep them from our church? How can we keep people who want to receive the Sacrament of Communion from Jesus’ table?”

They may have forgotten the new commandment that Jesus gave them: “Love your neighbor as yourself” and “Love one another as I have loved you.” Jesus gave no qualifications to this love. He didn’t

say, “Love only your Jewish sisters and brothers” or “Love those who think like you.” Jesus told them simply to love. I will repeat what we say at every worship service at First Congregational Church of Westfield and at Southwick Congregational Church. “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” You are welcome to worship with us, to break bread with us at the Lord’s table—it is the Lord’s table and not yours or mine or ours.

We come from all walks of life with different experiences, with our successes, failures, and foibles. We are all sinners! We might try to do the right thing, but all of us have done things and continue to do things that are certainly not done in the name of Christ. Here is the catch, we ask for forgiveness and God welcomes us back with open arms. Actually, God never pushed us away; we managed to do that all on our own. This is how we know that God gives us grace.

Because we receive grace (one of the gifts from our Spiritual Easter baskets) we pass it along to others. Christians can bring the gift of grace to our world like our ministry has brought optimism to our neighbors through our lunches, our work at the Community Table, our

work in our thrift shops, and our work with the Westfield and Southwick Food Pantries. In fact, it was grace that made the meeting between Peter and Cornelius not only possible, but even necessary. If grace can do this, just think what it could and will do in our world. If God's holy grace struck before, then God's holy grace can certainly do so again.

Let us go forth, by the grace of God, to abide in Jesus and live out his commandment to love one another as I have loved you. The non-believers used to make fun of the early Christians. I believe I have told you this. They would say, "Look at the little Christians, see how they 'love' one another." They would say it in a mocking tone. What did the early Christians do? They adopted this saying as their own. It works for us today. I certainly hope that when anyone speaks of the community of First Congregational Church of Westfield or Southwick Congregation Church, they would say without mocking, "See how they love one another."