

Stearns Road Kids

Acts 11:1-18

^{11:1}Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, ³"You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them." ⁴But Peter began and explained it to them in order: ⁵"I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. ⁶Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. ⁷And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' ¹⁰This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. ¹¹And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. ¹²And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' ¹⁵As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" ¹⁸When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, when I was a child (seventy years ago), if my brothers, sister, or I were misbehaving, or if we returned at the end of the day dirty and sweaty, our mother would admonish us, "You remind me of Stearns Road kids." What?!? Having never met, let alone played with a child from Stearns Road, I had no idea to what our mother referred. The allusion was lost on me. Having heard the phrase many times in reference to our less than perfect behavior, I concluded that Stearns Road kids were particularly dirty, ill-mannered, disrespectful, incorrigible, obstinate, and lived on "the wrong side of the tracks." Obviously, these were not children with whom I would want to be friends or with whom I would desire to play. It is amazing to me how we can form an opinion about someone, or an entire group of people whom we have never met. Oh, by the way, years later I searched for a Stearns Road in the Cleveland

area. I couldn't find it; maybe it does not exist anymore. I wonder what happened to all those kids.

I realize that first-century Jews could not help but running into Gentiles. I wonder if their mothers painted a fearsome mental image for their children regarding those not of the "chosen people." I can hear the Jewish mothers warn: "They are ill-mannered, incorrigible, devoid of the Torah, ritually unclean, irredeemable, and from the wrong side of the tracks. Don't be like them and avoid them at all costs." Such a mental image backed up by the Mosaic law, tradition, and centuries of history must have erected some super strong mental barriers for Jews interacting with Gentiles. They were the Stearns Road kids of ancient Palestine. Now imagine Peter returning to Jerusalem one day, contacting the acting ecumenical council of the early church, a council made up entirely of former Jews, and announcing, "Guess what guys? I have just invited a family of Stearns Road kids, that is Gentiles and friends, to join us as Christians. I even went that one better, I baptized them all with the Holy Spirit." I bet that caused an uproar!

"You what?" replied many.

Luke, the author of *The Acts of the Apostles*, obviously considered the conversion of Cornelius, a Roman centurion and his family, important since he devoted a chapter and a half to the story and its aftermath. In fact, the last twelve verses of chapter 9 detail Peter's journey to Caesarea where our story is set. The entirety of chapter 10 is Luke's description of the event. Peter makes his report and justifies his actions in baptizing a Roman soldier and his family and bringing them into the new church, the new Israel, the body of Christ.

Why should this story be so important? First, Luke uses his Gospel to reveal how Jesus is the Savior of not only the Jews but of all people. Now Luke provides us with an example. As the young Christian church grows, it comes to include those who had previously been outside God's "chosen people." There are no more barriers, no more "wrong side of the tracks." Everyone is fair game for the Gospel.

There are several conversion reports in Acts. Do you desire impressive numbers? Three thousand converted on the first Pentecost. Do you want sheer drama? It is hard to beat the conversion of Saul. There are Saul's crimes, his confrontation with Jesus, his being struck blind, and his consequent conversion. Do you want impossible odds? It is hard to top the story of the conversion of the jailer at Philippi and his entire family. What makes the story of Cornelius so special? The final verse of our text clarifies the point: "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

Until the moment of our text, those converted to the faith, for the most part, had been Jews and Jewish proselytes or “God-fearers.” Cornelius was a highly respected man, but he had not submitted himself to circumcision, which would have marked his entry under the Abrahamic covenant. He and his household were still “on the wrong side of the tracks” when they suddenly and unexpectedly became Christians. Could such a thing be possible, feasible, or acceptable?

These were outsiders, and Peter had granted them access. Is it any wonder then, that the Jerusalem elders sought an explanation from Peter? The mother church felt responsible for all the other congregations and for the proclamation of the good news everywhere. The leaders took very seriously their responsibility for validating and approving such a report.

The thrust of Peter’s defense is simple: God made it abundantly clear that He chose these people, so we baptized them. The Jerusalem Christians learned a valuable lesson that day – a lesson of which we should be regularly reminded. God chooses who will join His kingdom, and He chooses whom He will.

This incident could not have come at a more propitious moment. Think back to what happened at the beginning of chapter 9. Saul, “**still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,**” was confronted by the risen Savior. The upshot of it all was that the resurrected Savior appointed Saul as the apostle to the Gentiles. Saul, an outsider was about to enter a glorious new mission field. Peter blazes the trail. He moves the tracks. He takes the “good news” to the first set of Gentiles, reports what happens, and wins the church’s approval. When Saul is prepared, he receives the commission from the church in Antioch to take the Gospel to the Gentiles, after first sharing the message with the Jews. However, before this can happen Peter moves some tracks, fences so to speak, to open the way for Saul.

There is a story from World War II that illustrates this.

In France, some soldiers brought the body of a dead comrade to a cemetery to have him interred. The priest kindly asked whether their friend had been a baptized Catholic. The soldiers did not know. The priest sadly informed them that in that case, the soldier could not be permitted burial in the churchyard.

So, the other soldiers dug the grave outside the cemetery fence. They laid their comrade in arms to rest. The next day the soldiers returned to add some flowers – only to discover that they could not locate the grave.

Bewildered, they were about to depart when the priest came out to speak with them. It seems that he could not sleep the night before, so troubled was he by his refusal to bury the soldier in the parish cemetery. So early in the morning, he left his bed, and with his own hands, he moved the fence – in order to include the body of the soldier who had died for France. As the early church learned, truth demands we build some fences, but grace demands that the shape of these fences be flexible.

Peter's vision of the clean and unclean animals taught him that God cleanses. The words must have reverberated in his ears and heart. Luke records Peter's exact repetition of them to the elders: "What God has made clean; you must not call profane." Peter reported that he had received this vision three times. It was not a figment of his deluded imagination. There was no escaping God's fingerprint here. When God chose to include people who had been previously excluded, it is not that He has lowered His standards. His cleansing power in the blood of the Lamb brings up to standard anyone who receives the promise. As Paul informs us in Romans chapter 1, verses 16 & 17, this is God's righteousness revealed from faith for faith, first to last. Cornelius was not just a Gentile; he was a centurion in the hated army of Roman occupation! We can hardly imagine anybody who would make Jewish believers more nervous than a Roman officer. It was a Roman officer who condemned the Savior to a horrendous death on the cross. If God could redeem and cleanse Cornelius, He could redeem and cleanse everyone and anyone!

Peter witnessed the coming of the Holy Spirit on these Romans, and he understood that God blesses them. God's work of cleansing is not limited to secret, interior change. Peter realized that God's blessing upon Cornelius was in no way inferior to the blessing he and the others had received on Pentecost. He described it just that way to the elders: "And as soon as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as it had on us in the beginning." God withheld neither the gift of grace nor the Holy Spirit from the Gentiles. Peter, a witness to Christ's ministry, death, and resurrection was also an eyewitness of the Gentiles' receiving the Holy Spirit through the proclamation of the Gospel. God's love is intended for everyone, even Stearns Road kids.

And this is exactly where the story smacks us between the eyes. We are Gentiles, Stearns Road kids, born on the wrong side of the tracks. Yet Christ died for us also. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth;" and may I add, not many of you were from among God's special people, "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise...He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things...to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before Him" (1 Corinthians 1:26-30). And again, later, to the

Galatians, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26-28).

In awe and amazement, these early Christians struggled to get their arms around the concept of God welcoming the Gentiles, the Stearns Road kids from the wrong side of the tracks into His family. There was only one appropriate response – praise, the praise of our Psalm: “Praise the Lord from the heavens...praise him all the angels...young men and maidens together...Let them praise the name of the Lord...” (Psalm 148). And as Paul concludes in Romans 15:7: “Welcome one another, then, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” See to it that no centurion, no stranger, no outsider, not even an enemy is excluded from hearing that God cleanses, God blesses, and God gives life. Amen.

May the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!