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Acts 10:44-48

“God Doesn’t Play Favorites”

Just over a month ago, Gallup released a poll that found that church membership among Americans has fallen below 50% for the first time. Gallup has been taking this poll since 1937, when church membership was at 73% of the population. It shouldn’t come as a surprise to you that data shows that there has been a seismic shift away from religious institutions. We’ve been talking this for years. But this shift has really picked up speed in the last 20 years. In 1999, 70% of Americans said they belonged to a church, mosque, or synagogue. So we’ve lost a lot of ground since then.

Part of the shift is simple math. Older adults are more likely to be church members than Millennials (who range in age from 25-40) or Gen Z (who are roughly 8-24 years old), and younger generations make up a larger portion of the population as older generations die off.

Still, population replacement doesn't fully explain the decline in church membership. The two major trends driving the drop in church membership are 1: more adults have no religious preference; we call these people the “nones”. And 2: Among people who do claim a religion, they don’t join a church. Membership just isn’t as important as it used to be.

Added on top of all of this, of course, is the pandemic which forced most churches to close in March 2020 and caused a major disruption to religious life. And still is! Granted the downward trend was happening long before the pandemic, but the pandemic certainly hasn’t helped any. In fact, it has kept home the older generations we count on to be here week to week. And while many of them are slowly returning, there are some that find it increasingly difficult to attend church in person because of health and/or mobility issues, and there are others in all generations who have grown accustomed to worshipping at home.

So what do we do? We could moan and groan . . . and there are days when I do that. But there are also days, most days – when I am not willing to accept defeat

so easily or gracefully. Let us not forget that what we do here matters. Who will pick up the slack of feeding the hungry and clothing the naked if Christians are half of what they were? And just because people aren't joining a church or are disaffiliating with a religion doesn't mean their need for God or spiritual grounding is any less than what it used to be. The itch is still there, they're just scratching it in different ways.

So as we emerge from the pandemic and this new day dawns, what are we going to do knowing what we know?

In our story from Acts, a new day was also dawning and it, too, had enormous implications for the church. The Holy Spirit was working a powerful transformation among the early Christians, but if they and particularly Peter had not been willing to say "yes" to what the Holy Spirit was doing, the early Christian movement would have probably died an eventual death and we certainly wouldn't be here worshipping in this magnificent sacred space or watching online today.

Peter asks the gathered crowd, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" Well, most people in the crowd would have answered, "Yes, we can." Because that's what their religion taught them. Only circumcised Jews were baptized; men like Cornelius were certainly not. The water was withheld from guys like Cornelius who was a Gentile and a Roman Centurion. In Peter's day and age, no one was considered more unworthy of the waters of baptism to a faithful Jew like Peter than a guy like Cornelius who was the leader of 100 Roman soldiers. There were clearly defined laws about what was acceptable to God and what was not, and according to Jewish law, baptizing Cornelius was definitely not allowed.

But because of a series of visions and dreams, Cornelius and Peter meet. Peter goes to Caesarea at the request of Cornelius because Cornelius has had a vision that instructs him to send for Peter. Well, at the same time Cornelius was having his vision, Peter had one of his own, in which this great sheet comes down from heaven with all sorts of four-footed creatures on it. Well the narrator has already told us that is Peter famished, but he can't eat what's on the sheet because it's not kosher. But a voice answers to his protest, "What God has made clean, you

must not call profane.” Three times this happens, leaving Peter puzzled and still hungry.

But by the time Peter gets to Cornelius’ house, he’s beginning to put all the puzzle pieces together. The great sheet, the unclean animals, this Gentile household. “You know,” Peter says, “that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.” So Peter decides to stay for dinner and preaches a nice little sermon about Jesus of Nazareth who had been anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power.

Now if the story had ended there, it would have been fine and good and everyone would have made nice small talk over dinner. But it didn’t end there. Our reading picks up as Peter is concluding his sermon. He has not yet had a chance to baptize Cornelius and his family. He has not heard their confession of faith. They have not been confirmed or attended any new member classes or Coffee with the Pastors or Presbyterians 101. They have not been in front of the Session to be accepted into membership. None of that has taken place! There has been no doing anything decently and in order!

In fact, quite the contrary. The Holy Spirit, always a drama queen if you ask me, has come and fallen upon the crowd, and the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on Gentiles. Gentiles of all people! Roman centurions, and their families. Outsiders! And if that wasn't shocking enough, Peter gets up and declares, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

Peter echoes the question the Ethiopian eunuch asked Philip 3 chapters back. “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” Those who heard that story could have shouted, “Everything prevents you! You’re a different race, you are from a far-off country, you are a sexual misfit, and you have had very little instruction.” In both stories, there were good reasons to withhold the water of baptism. Yet the Holy Spirit surprised Philip on a desert road and surprised Peter in Cornelius’s house.

The Holy Spirit can be disruptive. Despite what we may think, the Holy Spirit isn’t always gentle like a nice summer breeze. The Holy Spirit can really shake things up, and for Peter and his friends, the Spirit really did a number. After Peter

baptizes Cornelius, he has to go to Jerusalem and defend himself in front of the church leaders. “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them,” they demand to know. And Peter explains to them his visions and what he saw in them and concludes by saying, “Who was I that I could hinder God?”

I wonder, can we be so stubborn in our desire to stay the way we are, that we hinder God?

Church historian Rosemary Radford Ruether says that the church must be organized to do two things:

1. Is to pass on the tradition from one generation to another.
2. Is to be open to the winds of the Holy Spirit by which the tradition comes alive in each generation.

This is a bit of an oxymoron. Because while we need to pass along the tradition, we need to be open to what future generations do with it. It reminds me of what someone once said to a church who desperately wanted new members. “Don’t forget they come with heads,” he said. In other words, they may want to change things.

Sometimes, the Spirit surprises the church and disrupts good order. Because sometimes the tradition becomes so rigid that the Holy Spirit can hardly find a crack to bring any new word.

When Peter declared, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have,” he changed the course of Christianity forever. He opened it to the whole world — to you and to me, who would never have been welcome if this vision of God’s impartiality had not worked its way through Peter’s — and Cornelius’ — active imaginations. The Holy Spirit was working a powerful transformation among the early Christians. Their perspective of how things should be done was being changed. The Spirit kept working through them despite their resistance to transform themselves and their communities. And because of that and their willingness to listen, Christianity moved in a way no one ever expected and it changed the course of Christianity forever. None of us would be here if Peter and Cornelius had closed their minds to the movement of the Spirit.

And so I ask you to consider today what do we need to do to reach those people who still have a yearning for God, but question how the church can help? In what new directions might the Spirit be leading the church? And where might the Spirit be leading you to assist with this mission? Where is the Holy Spirit trying to break through traditions that have become rock hard? And how do we continue to pass on the tradition from one generation to another while also being open to the Spirit that brings the tradition alive?

The preacher Will Willimon once said, "Jesus Christ is Lord, then the church has the adventurous task of penetrating new areas of his Lordship, expecting surprise and new implications of the gospel, which cannot be explained on any basis other than our Lord has shown us something we could not have seen on our own." He went on to say:

"Faith is our often breathless attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God, to keep asking ourselves 'What is God doing? Where on earth is God going now?'"

Amen.