

Sermon: 5th Sunday of Easter

Text: Acts 11:1-11 (v. 14)

Theme: The message that saves and is for all

Goal: The kingdom of God doesn't have boundaries.

Dear Friends,

Introduction: Xenophobia and discrimination are not something exclusive of this country. It comes from the heart of many people all around the world. What about ISIS? Driven by hate, thousands of people who don't agree with their faith and their way of life have been killed or displaced.

When we are driven by our selfishness as individuals or as a group/church, the outsiders are not good enough according to our way of thinking and are discriminated.

This was the challenge Peter faced at the beginning of his ministry. As a faithful Jew, walking always according to the laws and traditions of his people; and now also a follower and an apostle of the resurrected Jesus, having been sent out to preach the Gospel to the entire world, he found it a difficult task. Guided by the Holy Spirit, he went to the house of a Gentile, a Roman: Cornelius, Centurion of the Italian Regiment in Caesarea. God had a message to be delivered to Cornelius. And Peter was chosen by God to deliver this message, according to the guidance of the angel who appeared to Cornelius and said him: Call Peter; "he will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved."

I – The message saved the Jews who believed

The first ones who receive the message who saves were the Jews. Jesus' ministry was among the Jews, his own people, with some few exceptions. The first believers were Jews: The Twelve Apostles, the 500 hundred who saw the resurrected Jesus in Galilee, the three

thousand baptized on Pentecost Day... “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).

It seems that it was very difficult for the first Christian Jews to go out from their boundaries. They accepted that Jesus was the Promised Messiah, but they still believed that they had to worship God in the old traditional style, observing all the Old Testament holidays and rules, eating only kosher food, and don't mixing themselves with the Gentiles, so called “impure” people, because they ate pork and other kind of stuff that were impure for the Jews.

When you read the Book of Acts, between Pentecost and the story of our text are one two attempts to reach non-Jews with the Gospel: Philip, who was an Evangelist and not an Apostle, guided by the Holy Spirit went to Samaria and founded a Christian church among the Samaritans; and the same Phillip preach Jesus to the Ethiopian eunuch and baptized him (Acts 8:4-40). We have also the conversion of the Apostle Paul, who was called by God with the specific task to go to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). But it seems that the Twelve Apostles were not willing to go out from Jerusalem and from the Jewish people in this first stage of the Christian Church.

II - The message saved the Gentiles who believed

But God's plan is bigger than our plans. Jesus came to save all peoples, and He sent the Apostles to go to the entire world. To break the resistance of Peter, God gave him a vision, that showed him that he shouldn't consider impure what God had made clean. And immediately after this vision he was called by some people to go to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile. Reluctant, he took six other Jews with him as witnesses and went to Caesarea.

It was an uncomfortable situation for Peter and the others entering the house of a Gentile. It had never happened before. After the first

formalities and introductions, Peter began to proclaim Jesus, His death and resurrection. A big audience had been gathered by Cornelius: all his family, his household and friends. When Peter said in his sermon: “Everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name...the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message” (Acts 10:43). They confessed their faith in Jesus and were baptized.

Peter and his companions were hosted by Cornelius for some days and Peter had the opportunity to teach them more about the Christian faith and life guided by the Holy Spirit.

When Peter came back to Jerusalem, he was criticized by the Jewish believers because he was hosted and ate with Gentiles. *Through outpouring His Spirit on the gentiles despite their preferences for ham sandwiches, upsets the Jewish Christian world. Jesus prods his church out the door into uncomfortable and unfamiliar territory and conversations. By pouring out the Spirit on real gentiles, folks who have not observed the Torah rules about diet, circumcision, and Sabbath keeping, God has made the Jewish Christians anxious* (Phil Brandt p. 3). Peter explained that he couldn't resist to the work of the Holy Spirit, because the message of the Gospel was powerful to call the Gentiles to the same faith in Jesus they professed. “When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.”

III - The message saves us and our household as well

This is the same message that has been proclaimed for centuries and that has reached us and our household as well. Many others are in God's plan to be reached by the message of Jesus and to be saved, without discrimination or contempt, beginning with our

household. How many of our family and friends are not Christians? Are we calling them to listen to the message that saves, maybe in a special occasion in our house, or for a special service at the church? The pastor is willing and ready to go to your house, or with you to the house of your friends, like Peter went to Cornelius house. Look for opportunities. And this house, St. Thomas, is open to everyone. We have to be careful not to close ourselves into a shell, without looking to whom is seated next of us at the Service or to some visitor that seems to be isolated and lost among the traditional Lutherans. Who is Jesus putting into our paths so that I cannot ignore him to share the Good News of Jesus's love? Look around you and don't resist the work of the Holy Spirit. Maybe be there is a brother or a family member who is going astray. We have love to share with him, the love of Christ!

Conclusion: If we are too accommodated to our way of life and way of worship, we have to think about that God has many other sheep that he wants to call to His flock through us. We are His tools to proclaim the message that saves according to the gifts and opportunities He gives to each of us. We have to submit ourselves to the will of *the Spirit of God, because is He who defines the mission of the church...*The outsiders, from other culture, race, country or language, *are God's people too. He loves them, Jesus has died for them, we are all together the children of God... God loves us and He loves all!* (Phil Brandt, p.41). What can we do for them?

We are beneficiaries of the mission the Christian Church is doing along the centuries in all the world and among all peoples. We praise God that we have the opportunity to listen to the message that saves and believe in God's promise. Let's share it with the blessing of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Pastor Carlos Walter Winterle, Cape Town, 24 April 2016.