

What Can Prevent Us?

Text: Acts 10:44-48; John 15:9-17

According to the brief story recounted in the Book of Acts that we read a few moments ago, Peter was preaching to a group of Gentiles, the family and household of the Roman centurion, Cornelius, to be precise, when suddenly the Holy Spirit descended on his audience. Although the Jewish Christians who accompanied Peter to Cornelius' house were astounded at the gift of the Spirit to non-Jews, Peter calmly asks: "Who can withhold water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" He asks simply "What can prevent us?" This, of course, is a rhetorical question that Peter asks, for it should be obvious to us that nothing should prevent these people from being baptized.

But even if the question is rhetorical, it is no throw away, and Peter himself knows that it isn't when he asks it. For if it seems obvious to the present day reader that nothing should prevent anybody who has received the Spirit from entering the church, it was not always obvious. And it was particularly not obvious to Peter just a few days before he asked this question. Only a few days before, Peter knew exactly what would prevent them from bringing water to baptize Gentiles, and that was that they were Gentiles, pure and simple. Being a Gentile was reason enough not to welcome somebody into the community, and to engraft them into Christ's body.

Peter was only a fisherman, and not a rabbi. But he knew what every Jew knew – that God's promise to Abraham was to Abraham and his descendants, and this promise was sealed by the sign of circumcision, and held by keeping the Law of Israel in all its provisions. The promise did not include Gentiles, unless they chose to convert and keep the Law, and, if male, be circumcised. If Christ is the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham and his descendants, then it only stands to reason that he is the fulfillment of that promise to the Jews. So what would then

prevent Cornelius and his Gentile household from being baptized, even though they were God-fearers, was that they were Gentiles. *That* was perfectly obvious, and indeed, to ask “what would prevent us?” ought to have been a rhetorical question that could have been answered simply by saying “Everything.”

Or so Peter thought until a few days before he asks this question. But something had happened to him in the meantime. While visiting the city of Joppa, Peter had gone up to the roof of the house where he was staying to pray. He became hungry and while waiting for his supper to be brought to him, he fell into a trance and had a vision of something like a large sheet being lowered to the ground filled with all sorts of animals that were not considered kosher. When a voice then said to him, “Get up Peter, kill and eat,” he replied, “By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane and unclean.” But the voice simply replied: “What God has made clean you must not call profane.” Now at first, Peter could not make sense of this vision and what it meant, not until messengers from Cornelius’ house arrived, asking Peter to come to Cornelius’ house so that Cornelius might hear what Peter had to say about his Lord. It was then that the meaning of the vision dawned on Peter. As he said simply when he arrived at Cornelius’ house, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or even to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection.”

So Peter had a change of heart. Whereas earlier he would have said, “Everything prevents us from bringing water to baptize them,” now he is willing to say boldly, “Nothing prevents us.” Nothing prevents us from welcoming anybody on whom the Spirit has fallen, or even who seeks the Son.

Peter’s vision, along with Paul’s later conversion that suddenly changed his mind about

the church and that led him to become the apostle to the Gentiles, are momentous events in the history of the church that changed it forever. Without those events, I dare say that none of us would be here since we are not physical descendants of Abraham. Just as important, it is because of those events that we understand God's promise to Abraham and its fulfillment in Christ Jesus in the way we do. Without those events, this would be a very different sort of community, both in its human make-up and in its self-understanding of what it means to be a Christian community. For as we understand things now, this community ought to exclude nobody – Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free if they would know God. The kingdom is made up of saints “from every tribe and language and people and nation.” As we understand things now, all these different people ought to be one community, a community bound together in love, where Christ's great commandment to “love one another as I have loved you” is practiced. As we understand things now, nothing ought to prevent us from welcoming and baptizing those on whom the Spirit descends.

Now that doesn't mean that we, in fact, baptize everybody. It doesn't mean that everybody is welcome because our standards are too low for us to restrict our welcome. If someone does not believe, that would prevent us from engrafting him or her into the body. If they thought it was simply the social thing to do, an opportunity to do some networking, that would prevent us. Or, if they wanted to be baptized for superstitious reasons, that might well prevent us. Similarly, a lack of commitment on the part of the baptismal candidate would prevent bringing the water. Baptism is the beginning of a life, a new life, a life such as Cornelius was already living, and more. It is a life of prayer, concern for others and concern for what God thinks and promises; it is a living in community loving others as he loved us, listening to his Word, and finding his presence in communion with the whole community. Those who have no intention of

beginning that sort of life, or teaching their children to live that life, well, that would prevent us.

Those are what we might call the objective reasons why water might not be brought.

Those are reasons that do and should prevent us. But there is another more important reason that arises too often and that also prevents our welcoming strangers and the new things they bring to our fellowship. It is the sort of reason that prevented Peter before his vision from thinking that uncircumcised Gentiles could be baptized. And what is this that prevents us? Us. Us and the ways we look at others. Us, and the unattractive example of belief that we sometimes present. Us, and the way we cannot welcome the stranger.

That lack of welcome is unfortunate for two reasons. First, it is unfortunate for outsiders who, like Cornelius, seek welcome. It is indeed more than unfortunate that God leads souls to churches, where they ought to find God, but don't. They ought to be able to come to churches and find a place to dwell and to flourish. They ought to be able to find one of those many mansions that Christ promised to exist in his Father's house.

But it is also unfortunate for us. For what the stranger brings is always something new, something that may be missing in our lives – a new vision, perhaps, without which we will perish.

Flannery O'Connor, that great American writer of what she called "the Christ haunted South" once wrote a short story titled "The Displaced Person" that illustrates these problems.

The story takes place on the dairy farm of a Mrs. McIntyre, a woman who had married a man forty years her senior, and who had inherited the farm when he died four years later. Like many Southern farmers, she employed a white family, in this case the Shortlys, to help her, and several unskilled black farmhands. As the story begins, she has also just taken onto the farm a new family, the Guizacs. They are from Poland, and are now in rural Georgia because they have

been displaced from Poland after the Second World War. Mrs. McIntyre to herself normally calls Mr. Guizac simply the Displaced Person; his name is more than she can pronounce.

Now, at first things go well. Mr. Guizac may not be able to speak much English, but he works hard, and for little pay, and he does not complain. He gets work done in half the time or less than it takes Mr. Shortly to do it. There isn't a machine on the farm he can't fix and run. In short, Mrs. McIntyre's enterprise flourishes when this stranger comes her way. And she is happy. She tells Mrs. Shortly: "I've got somebody I can depend on. For years I've been fooling with sorry people. Sorry people. Poor white trash and (Well, you know what). They've drained me dry...not one of them left without taking something off this place that didn't belong to them. Not a one!"

This admiration for the hardworking Guizac, however, makes the Shortlys nervous and makes everybody else on the place nervous, too. Why employ both the Displaced Person *and* others? It doesn't seem that one would need so many people when you have somebody like Mr. Guizac. More to the point, the pitifulness of their contributions are shown in a very harsh light next to his. Mr. Shortly figures he's a dead person and will be let go.

But things change quickly. Mrs. McIntyre begins to doubt that anybody so good as Mr. Guizac will stay. And then, she discovers one of the black farmhands with a photo of a young white girl. It is Guizac's niece in Poland, who has been in the refugee camps for three years. Apparently Guizac has suggested to the farmhand that she could come to America if he were to marry her. To Mrs. McIntyre's mind this simply cannot be contemplated. Such talk would upset every black laborer on the farm, and create moral chaos. So she accuses Guizac, ironically, of ingratitude. She comes to the conclusion: "You're like the rest of them." And she tells him that she has been handling the world's overflow all this time and she can handle a Pole like Guizac.

Things go from bad to worse. The Shortlys and pretty soon the whole town suggest that Guizac is taking a job from Americans. They suggest, and Mrs. McIntyre believes it herself, that her first duty is to her own people and “not to Mr. Guizac who had merely arrived here to take advantage of whatever he could.” She fears he will bring his foreign ways into *her* place; the presence of the Catholic priest who regularly comes to visit the Guizacs seems to prove it. In short, she is ready to let the Displaced Person go, even though he has nowhere to go.

But she doesn't have to let him go. For shortly after deciding this, while Guizac was under the tractor fixing it, it began to roll. Although she could have yelled out to warn him, and so could have Shortly or the farmhand standing there, none of them did, and it ran over him and crushed him and killed him

Now there is obvious bigotry and prejudice going on here, bordering on the criminal. There is undoubtedly, too, the fear of the unknown that any stranger brings, even if he brings good things as well. But the really deep issue at stake is raised by O'Connor in this way: At one point soon after she has taken against Guizac, the Catholic priest is visiting and talking to Mrs. McIntyre. She explains to him that she will have to let the Displaced Person go, because, she says, “he doesn't fit in.” As she is talking, the priest keeps watching the peacock that wanders around the farm, an extravagant leftover from the dead husband. It, too, is something that doesn't fit in. In fact. Mrs. McIntyre intends to get rid of it. Although he has seen it many times, the priest has never seen its show of plumage. And it is just then that it raises its magnificent tail. The priest stands in slack jawed amazement, and mutters, “Christ will come like that!” Mrs. McIntyre who thinks he is an old idiot, keeps talking. Speaking of Guizac, she says, “He didn't have to come in the first place.” Not really paying attention to her, but answering her all the better for it, the priest, thinking his own thoughts, absently replies: “He came to redeem us.”

That is what strangers can do for us, if we are spiritually alive enough to welcome them, and to recognize that they can expand our horizons and help give us vision. T. S. Eliot once wrote: "...to approach the stranger is to invite the unexpected, release a new force, or let the genie out of the bottle. It is to start a train of events beyond your control." Sometimes that is frightening, but the strangeness also brings freshness, and whatever new thing God wants to do in your life. When the early church saw that nothing would prevent them from welcoming the stranger, when the early church welcomed the gifts of all those who were foreign and unlike them, it flourished and grew. The story of the growth of the church in the book of Acts is the record of saying that there is nothing to prevent us from welcoming the stranger. It's growth was the proof of the power of the resurrection and of the Spirit.

But what happens at the end of the story of the Displaced Person suggests what also happens when we don't welcome the new and strange, when we let ourselves be prevented from welcoming them. Although at the end of the story Guizac is dead, and thus the foreigner is gone, and nobody is left on the farm but those who do fit in, Shortly and all the farmhands leave that very night to look for new positions. Mrs. McIntyre is left alone, and has to sell all the animals. Her enterprise that once thrived, and thrived all the better for the presence of the stranger, has ended. All that is left are the visits of the priest, who comes to try to talk to her about doctrine, which she resists, but who also comes to feed the peacock. He alone signifies that there is the hope that Christ might come again to this place, but, for now, Christ is absent.

The church will continue to flourish as long as it welcomes all that the Spirit makes alive, and it will continue to flourish as long as it heeds our Savior's admonition to love one another in the extravagant way he loved us. We will flourish here by welcoming all that is not like us; we will perish the moment we do not.

So always remember what a grace it is to welcome the stranger, and that it is a proof of the Spirit's power and presence to welcome the unusual and new. Remember that the church's mission in spreading the gospel is in telling the world that it is never too strange to be welcomed, and that no one with sincere desire is ever to be excluded. And if you do that, you will have begun to really be the church, the place where the people love each other as he first loved us. You will flourish.