

Welcome on this Mother's Day 2015. All Moms are unique, of course. Joan Torello says her mother is notorious for her lead foot. Joan was not at all surprised to hear that a Georgia State Trooper pulled her mother over for speeding as she raced through the state on the way home from Florida.

Hoping to get off with a warning, Joan's mother tried to appear shocked when the officer walked up to her car. "I have never been stopped like this before," she said to the officer.

"What do they usually do, ma'am," he asked, "shoot the tires out?"

It's not easy being a Mom.

Consider the case of one stay-at-home Mom. One evening she went to a PTA meeting and her husband and her oldest daughter got together and decided they would clean up the kitchen for her. So they did. They put up all the food, wiped all the counters, washed all the pots and put them away, put the dishes in the dishwasher and ran it. They swept and mopped the floors and then sat down, and overcome by their own nobility, they awaited her arrival.

Two hours later she returned from the meeting, took off her coat, hung it up, walked through the kitchen into the den, grabbed the remote control, and began watching television. They followed her over to her chair and stood by her side. Finally she felt them looking over her shoulder and looked up at them and said, "What?"

Her husband said, "The kitchen."

"The kitchen. What?"

"The kitchen. We cleaned up the kitchen. Didn't you notice? It's sparkling clean. We cleaned it for you."

The woman replied, "Yes, I noticed. Thankless job, isn't it?"

President Theodore Roosevelt said at the turn of the century:

When all is said, it is the **Mother**, and the **Mother** only, who is a better citizen than the soldier who fights for his country. The successful **Mother**, the **Mother** who does her part in rearing and training aright the boys and girls who are to be the men and women of the next generation, is of greater use to the community, and occupies, if she would only realize it, a more honorable as well as a more important position than any man in it. The **Mother** is the one supreme asset of the national life. She is more important, by far, than the successful statesman, or businessman, or artist, or scientist

I heard an amusing story recently about a Southern Baptist pastor who answered his telephone one day and heard a man's voice. "Please send six cases of whiskey to my house," said the voice. "We're having a party." To say the least, the pastor was surprised. Southern Baptist pastors are not in the habit of delivering cases of whiskey to people's homes. Even more surprising, he recognized the voice as being that of one of his deacons. Evidently the deacon had been calling a liquor store and dialed his pastor's home by mistake.

"Brother Jones," the pastor said to the man on the other end of the line, "This is your pastor."

It got real quiet on the other end of the line, "Well, pastor," asked the deacon. "What are you doing at the liquor store?"

Pastors get surprises sometimes. Some are pleasant surprises; some are not so pleasant. And some surprises turn your whole world upside down. Our lesson today from Acts 10 is about a surprise that turned the world upside down for the early church.

Up until the time of today's lesson Christianity had for the most part been a Jewish sect. Samaritans were welcome, for they were regarded as half-Jews. But, before Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, no Gentiles had been welcomed into the fraternity. And the Ethiopian's baptism took place out in the wilderness, far from Jerusalem. Who would even know?

Our story today begins with a Roman centurion named Cornelius, a man described by Luke, the author of Acts, as devout and generous. And he was a Gentile. Cornelius had a vision, a vision of an angel instructing him to send for a man named Simon Peter who was staying in a home in Joppa. Cornelius heeded the angel's instructions and sent three of his men to Joppa to bring Peter back with them.

While the three men were on their journey, something extraordinary was happening in Joppa. This same Simon Peter had gone up to the roof of the house where he was staying to pray and he, too, had a vision. "He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.' 'Surely not, Lord!' Peter replied. 'I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.' The voice spoke to him a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven." While Peter was pondering this vision, the three men sent by Cornelius arrived at the house where Peter was staying. And the Spirit spoke to Peter telling him to go with the three men.

The next day Peter did just that, taking with him a few of his Christian friends. When they got to the house of Cornelius, they found a large group of people gathered there, relatives and close friends of Cornelius. At first, this disturbed Peter. These were Gentiles. It was against Jewish law for him to even associate with Gentiles. But then Peter remembered his dream. God had shown him that he should not call anyone impure or unclean. He asked Cornelius why he had sent for him. Cornelius proceeds to tell him about his own vision--about the angel who had instructed him to send for Peter. Then he told Simon Peter that he was prepared to listen to anything he had to say.

Then Peter began to speak. And he begins with some remarkable words. He says, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right . . ."

"God does not show favoritism . . ." That's a radical statement even today. Every group I know expects God to show partiality to its own group. Even at football games, people want God to favor their team. Two thousand years ago in Judea, this was a particularly important theme. The Jewish people had survived by being exclusive. And even the early Christian church restricted itself to those who were circumcised Jews. Now Peter was disregarding all that. No one is to be regarded as impure or unclean. It was an amazing turnabout. Then Peter begins to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. It was the testimony of one who had experienced Christ's coming--up close and personal. This brings us to our lesson for today:

"While Peter was still speaking these words," says the writer of Acts, "the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message." In other words, Peter didn't even get to finish his message. He was just getting warmed up when the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles gathered there in Cornelius' house, much like it came upon the Jews in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Suddenly these Gentiles were speaking in different languages just as they had spoken in different languages on that day when the church was born. It was an amazing event. Luke tells us that the "circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, 'Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.' So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ . . ."

Peter had no idea when he awoke the day before what lay in store for him over the next 36 hours. The whole mission of the Christian community had been turned on its head. Things would never again be the same. That's what happens when the Spirit moves. Things are changed. People are changed. Social situations change.

So often, over the past half-century when we have come to this story, we have emphasized the inclusiveness of the Gospel. That's understandable. Peter suddenly realized that all people were God's children, and that he dare not refuse baptism to any because of their cultural or racial background. This truth has been particularly important to us since the days of the Civil Rights movement. It spoke to us of the injustices in our own society.

Pastor Gregory Bloomquist tells of being in a movie theater when the classic film, In the Heat of the Night, was first being shown. For those of you too young to remember In the Heat of the Night, it is set in Sparta, Mississippi during a time when the South was just emerging from the dark days of segregation. A murder has been committed. Rod Steiger plays sheriff Bill Gillespie, a good lawman despite his racial prejudices. When Virgil Tibbs played by Sidney Poitier, a well-dressed northern African-American, comes to town, Gillespie instinctively puts him under arrest as a murder suspect. Tibbs then reveals that he is a Philadelphia homicide detective. Tibbs offers to help in Gillespie's investigation. As the clues and suspects mount, Gillespie and his deputies develop begrudging respect for this Yankee, black officer.

In one scene Detective Tibbs and Sheriff Gillespie pay a visit to the wealthiest man in the town. He is clearly cut from the same cloth as any slave owner of a hundred years earlier. He is also a suspect, in Tibbs' mind, in the murder. When the white landowner realizes that Tibbs suspects him of murder, he slaps him. Without blinking Virgil Tibbs, the African-American northerner slaps him right back.

Pastor Bloomquist says that when he saw this film in the 1960s that scene caused audible gasps in the movie theater. But, it was not the slapping of Tibbs that caused the gasp; it was Tibbs reaction and subsequent slapping of the landowner that caused the gasps--a black man slapping a white man. That was something that just wasn't done, says Bloomquist. In fact, the landowner says to Tibbs: "I could have had you shot for that." But, realizing the sheriff is there, the landowner turns to the sheriff and says to him: "Well, sheriff, what are you going to do about it?" thinking that the sheriff will take Tibbs and see that he is put away for good. The sheriff, however, looks for words and says: "Well, well, I don't know what I'm going to do." (1) And he probably didn't know what he was going to do. What he did know was this--his world would never again be the same.

The Civil Rights movement was a shock to American society, but who can doubt it was led by the Spirit of God? When the Spirit moves, walls come down. So generally when we come to this text, that's the first thing we see is how the Spirit batters down the walls that separate people.

But we might also see what this move by the Spirit did for the church. When Peter baptized Cornelius and the other Gentiles, it opened the church to astounding growth. Soon those from Gentile backgrounds far outnumbered those from Jewish backgrounds. Imagine if Christianity had remained a Jewish sect. Would we have had the same impact on the world? Not by a long shot. Can we not see that inclusiveness is not simply a politically correct approach to life? Inclusiveness is part of God's plan for establishing God's Kingdom. This is the reason Christ came into the world -to reach out to all people.

One of the hot questions in American society today is, what shall we do about illegal immigration? That is a political question. Let the politicians answer it. Here's the religious question: What if you and I encounter illegal immigrants? How should we treat them? The answer is, we treat them as Peter did Cornelius. We treat them with respect as children of God. We don't have a choice if we are followers of Jesus. We share with them the love of Christ, and if there is any chance that we can bring them into our fellowship, then we issue an invitation, and if they accept that invitation, then we give them a Christian embrace. That's who we are. That's what being the church is all about. That's what the Kingdom of God is all about. As followers of Jesus, our primary goal is not to preserve American culture but to minister to people, all people, and to share in the coming of God's Kingdom. This is not to disparage those who hold legitimate concerns about our porous borders. It is to say that our priority as the church of Jesus Christ is to reach out to all people regardless of who they are or what they've done or where they came from. We are to do this so that the kingdoms of this world might become the Kingdom of our God. Inclusiveness is right at the heart of the Gospel. "God so loved the world . . ." You can't get more inclusive than that.

How does the Kingdom of God come? Let me tell you a story. About twenty years ago, a high school youth group headed out on their annual work camp and backpacking trip at Blue Lake Youth Camp. One of the boys who went along on that trip was from another church and didn't really know the youth or the adult leaders. His name was Ben, and he was, to put it kindly, a challenge. The leaders had been given the heads-up on Ben. He was a troubled young man who was often belligerent toward people in positions of authority. It was no mystery why he acted that way; his father was serving time in prison. The minister from Ben's church had begged the youth leaders to include Ben because he believed the experience would be good for him.

The leaders, Bob and Margie, were nervous when the trip began, but it turned out to be a positive experience. Ben had a couple of minor outbursts along the way, but Bob and Margie were patient with him and they treated him with more kindness than he was accustomed to experiencing. A few weeks following the trip, Ben got back together with the group to share pictures and remembrances of their special time together. That was the last time the group saw him.

Sixteen years later, Bob went back to Blue Lake Camp. While he was there, he noticed a man working on one of the cabins. He went over to the man and struck up a conversation, and it turned out that it was Ben. His story unfolded. After high school Ben went into the Marines, and then after serving six years in the Marines he went to college, where he later graduated with honors. Currently he's married, and he is in charge of the local school district's computer labs. He told Bob that the work camp experience, sixteen years earlier, had been a pivotal event in his life. It was the

first time he could remember being appreciated by others and included in a group. He still cherishes the memories of that trip and the way Bob and Margie cared for him. Bob was stunned, because he had practically forgotten the trip and he had no idea what effect they had on this young man. (2) A camping experience had changed a young man's life.

Now here's what's important: Ben's name could have been Jose or, if he had been a she, it could have been Chamiqua. It doesn't make any difference. Only one thing matters, that the followers of Jesus Christ share his love with all people--young people or old, rich people or poor, black, brown or white, from educated families or from families where Dad is in prison, all people--until that day comes when every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God. This is our task. That is our reason for being. We have no other.

1. Holy Thursday (Year A), St. Mark the Evangelist Anglican Church, Ottawa, ON (March 28, 2002

L.<http://www.bloomquist.ca/publications/Church%20materials/holy%20thursday%20year%20a%202002.html>

2. Charlotte Ann Russell, "Summer Prayer," preached at First Congregational Church of Berkeley on July 26, 1998. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones. <http://chesterpres.org/osermons/s110401.htm>