

After church last Sunday, Bob Stikeleather gave me a book ... on preaching! Bob was quick to reassure me the book wasn't given as a commentary on my preaching, but rather just a book he found cleaning out the house that needed a good home. And I believe him, and I appreciate my new book titled "Go Tell the People" by Theodore Ferris. I love learning more about preaching and other aspects of pastoral ministry.

One of the first things the book says is, "Jesus must be presented to people before they can be expected to follow him ...

In today's New Testament lesson, the Apostle Peter is telling people about Jesus – about how Peter's whole worldview was changed when he came to know the Risen Lord as his personal Savior and the one, sure hope of our world. If we back up just a bit in the Book of Acts, we see that just before this, Peter had a dream or vision of a large sheet coming down from heaven with images of birds and other animals that were not to be eaten by devote Jews like Peter. And he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat. ... What God has made clean, you must not call profane." While Peter was trying to figure out what this means, three messengers come to him from a Roman centurion named Cornelius, who himself had a vision telling him to send for Peter and listen to what he says. Peter goes to Cornelius and is busy telling him about Jesus when

Well, today's Gospel lesson tells us what happens next. "While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles ..." Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ."

While that doesn't sound too crazy to us – people hearing about Jesus, accepting him as Lord and Savior, and being baptized into the family of faith – while that sounds right to us, it did not sound right to Peter – not at first – nor did it sound right to his fellow believers who came to Christianity from the Jewish faith, who Acts calls the circumcised believers.

It turns out that Peter and folks from his church were only sharing about their spiritual lives with people like them – those with the same religious background – so much so that Peter begins by saying to Cornelius earlier in Acts, "You yourself know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean."

Being profane or unclean just meant you didn't follow Jewish religious practices, things like keeping the Sabbath holy (which means going to church on Sunday), refraining from the abuse of food, alcohol and other substances, not cursing or taking the Lord's name in vain, not sleeping around, not lying or cheating or stealing or attacking others, but rather treating everyone like a child of God. Peter looked at people outside his family of faith and he thought God had written them off, only to find out that God was doing something new and unexpected. God was putting it in the hearts of outsiders to be open to Jesus in their need for help and guidance and God placed Peter in just the right place at just the right time to help those outside the faith hear and embrace God's outreach to them.

How many people have we written off when it comes to helping them grow in the faith, helping them to see the church, the family of faith, as a safe and joyful place to turn for guidance and inspiration? How many people out there in need of help and guidance from the church or a faithful friend and neighbor like you and me, if only we would go out of our way to find them, if only we would find a way to come alongside them in their need? It's sad to think about – those we've just given up on.

The real reason we've given up on them is because it's hard to keep reaching out to people who turn a deaf ear to our outreach and invitation, our help and guidance. That takes faith and persistence. Oh, and it's even harder to find and embrace new people, those we have yet to encounter who are in need of Christian love and support. That takes thought and planning.

Whether it's folks we've written off or people we need to go out and find, we have to be shaken out of our complacency and spurred on to new and bold actions. In order to really reach people on behalf of Jesus, we have to be more like Peter. Peter was going about his business building up the church among his fellow Jewish believers when God shook him up with that vision and spurred him on with that unexpected visit from three strangers, spurred him on to go out among the Gentiles, Gentiles like Cornelius and his Roman friends and family who were outside the faith, outside the church.

As uncomfortable as that must have been, Peter does it. Peter begins to tell them about Jesus. And that's when God sends the Holy Spirit, where it says, "While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word." God interrupts Peter!

God knows Peter and the other believers must have been wondering if they're in the right place, talking to the right people, saying the right things. So God sends the Holy Spirit to reassure them and help them in bringing others along in the faith. Well, we can count on that, too. We can count on God to reassure us and help us in bringing others along in the faith. But to do that, we have to go where God sends us and share what God puts on our hearts.

Ours is a God who takes those uncomfortable situations we get in and creates a unique opportunity to be in the right place at the right time to help and guide someone in need. Look for those opportunities in your life, and don't miss them. There's nothing like that feeling of the Spirit moving among you while you're connecting with another human being.

Ah, and that's the hard part – connecting with, talking with others about our faith, about how Jesus has changed our whole worldview. But that's really what it takes – talking to people. There's nothing like a one-on-one interaction to bring two people together in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. If that's not happening to you from time to time – if you never feel the Spirit moving in your life and in your interactions – get out there and give it try. Look for that opportunity to open up to someone, and then watch as the Holy Spirit lights you up inside, warms your heart, works that miracle in that person's life, and in your life, too.

This is how God chose to grow the family of faith – both spiritually and numerically – by having us go deeper with one another, and particularly with those who have yet to take on their spiritual growth, find their place in the family of faith, trust and rely on Jesus to lead them along the way. As it says in our closing hymn – which we'll sing in a moment or two – “We respond with deep commitment, fresh new lines of faith to trace, ... fresh new linens of faith to trace.

May we learn the art of sharing, side by side and friend with friend, equal partners in our caring, to fulfill God's chosen end.”

Let us go forth today looking for those fresh, new lines of faith to trace, building up the church God planted, here among us in this place. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Let us pray:

With a mother's love, compassionate God, you care for us. You nourish us with an embrace of holy love that surrounds us, forgives us, and encourages us.

You set us in families where guidance, wisdom and acceptance may grow and be shared. You call us into families of faith where our spiritual roots grow deep and strong.

On this special day of celebration, we lift up those women who have been the foundation of faith for their families, and for those wayward children of yours who have found a mother's love and guidance in women beyond their own families.

As we live in families and family-like relationships, may we feel the deep presence of companionship and belonging that comes from you.

Help us, Lord God, to realize that we belong to one great human family and that you have set before us the day when we all will be in peace together.

We pray your peace and compassion be felt and embraced by those struggling with illness, injury and disease. We pray for your comfort and peace on those in grief. We pray for all those in need of your healing touch and reassuring Spirit. We pray all this in your most Holy Name, Lord Jesus, as we join together in the prayer that you taught us, praying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.