

“No Distinction between Us”  
 delivered Sunday, May 2, 2010  
 by Rev. Agnes W. Norfleet, pastor  
 Shandon Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC  
 Acts 11:1-18

I have a new favorite Christian writer. Now, before any one of you reaches for a pen to jot down her name, let me say a word about Sara Miles. While she is decidedly Christian, and her books are about living the gospel, you will not find in her writing the beautiful, seasoned reflection of a Frederick Buechner, or Barbara Brown Taylor, or Kathleen Norris, whose eloquent prose considers the world through their long acquaintance with the Christian faith. No, Sara Miles is more Anne Lamott; her Christianity the raw, unfiltered passion of recent convert. She uses bold language, some of which I would dare not repeat from the pulpit, but she comes to faith with an energetic passion to practice what she believes. I find her very refreshing. The title of her most recent book, hot off the press, says it all: *Jesus Freak – feeding – healing – raising the dead...* (1)

That’s her self-description – a Jesus Freak who is trying to be faithful to her newfound calling to follow Jesus and fulfill his commission to do his work. I can safely say not one of us would head out of worship this morning – to brunch in a Five Points restaurant – run into a friend or neighbor and announce: “I’ve just come from Shandon Pres; I’m a Jesus Freak.” Dignified Presbyterians just don’t talk like that! But when you become acquainted with the story of how this born and bred, committed atheist has been bowled over by the power of Christ in her life, you cannot help but look at your own Christian life, and wonder – whether tradition, or convention, or habit hasn’t worn away some of the dynamic vitality God intends to be the mark of the gospel life.

The Acts of the Apostles, as you know, is Luke’s sequel to his gospel. It is about the dynamic vitality of the Christian faith that took hold in the hearts of the earliest believers – and how they, in turn, began to spread the good news of Jesus Christ to the world. The conversion stories in Acts are not stories for individuals alone; Acts is about the conversion of a people who become the church. As one commentary on this text has noted – here “Conversion is not for the smug individual possession of the convert, but rather for the ongoing thrust of the gospel.” (2)

The conversion story before us this morning was so important to the early church that it is told twice – first in chapter 10, and then retold in chapter 11, as Peter testified in Jerusalem before a feisty group of critics about the Holy Spirit falling on the Gentiles. No issue was more debated by the early Christians, or more important to them, than whether their newfound faith was intended only for Jews, or whether it was to include Gentiles. What most disturbed the Jewish believers in Jesus was table fellowship with Gentiles. These dietary distinctions may seem archaic to us, but remember that it was a strict observance of the Law of Moses that had held the Jewish people together for centuries – against all odds and all kinds of oppression. In his commentary on Acts, Will Willimon says, “The dietary laws demarcated faithfulness in the midst of incredible pressure to forsake the faith, drop one’s particularities and become a good citizen of the Empire (as opposed to the Kingdom of God)... (For the Jews – ) A little pork here, a pinch of incense to Caesar there, and it will not be long before the faith community will be politely obliterated.” (3)

The stakes were very high for the early church on this matter because the first Christians were Jews who had clung to a strict legal system bearing their cultural, social, and religious

heritage. Their way of life had excluded outsiders, especially the pagan Gentiles. The Gentiles were considered unclean, and uneducated in the faith, the law and the prophets. The early Jewish Christians simply did not know what to do, when seized by the power of the Risen Christ, Peter began sharing the story of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentiles. Moved by the stories of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the Gentiles became believers.

And when the Jews heard that Peter had been running around baptizing Gentiles, they were furious! They lodged their fervent complaint against Peter, "Why did you go to these complete outsiders, eat with them, baptize them, make Christians out of them?" "I was among them and praying, and I had a vision," Peter says. A large sheet came down from heaven, and I looked and saw that it contained four footed animals, beasts and reptiles and birds of the air (all forbidden as food for faithful Jews.) And a voice from heaven said: What God has made cannot be called unclean. Get up, kill and eat. When Peter finished proclaiming his vision, his critics were silent, and they came to see for themselves that God has given – even to the Gentiles – the gift of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no distinction between us.

It's a strange story, isn't it? As hazy as the retelling of the oddest of dreams. In its oddness it may seem utterly irrelevant to us, but nothing could be further from the truth. In reality – the dream that Peter described way back when is the day you and I became heirs to the gospel of Jesus Christ. For our sake ancient barriers came tumbling down to include us in the embrace of God's salvation. And what that means for us today is that the church of Jesus Christ is the one place where there is ultimately no distinction between us.

Everywhere we look today there is division, clearly drawn lines of demarcation distinguishing one type of person from another. Just think about what all the talking heads have been talking about this week. We can strengthen our border between Mexico and the United States. We can pass laws that call for people of a certain race or ethnicity to carry their papers and prove their citizenship, and be subjected to special questioning. But those whom God has created, according to the Bible, we dare not profane – which means we dare not treat with abuse or contempt. We can choose up sides, align ourselves, and name our distinctions as liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican or Independent; watch Fox News or MSNBC...but according to the Bible, through Christ there are no insiders or outsiders for the Kingdom of God. We can separate ourselves – the rich from the poor; the housed from the homeless, the insured from the uninsured, but we cannot draw a boundary around the church of Jesus Christ.

The trouble with the Holy Spirit is that blows where it will; we cannot control it, and if we really want to live like Easter people, we might want to pay more attention to the newly converted – who may better understand that – in God's eyes – there is no distinction between us. The newly converted, you see, have something to say to those of us so traditioned in the faith that we no longer live with impassioned curiosity wondering what God will do next.

With the curiosity of a journalist, Sara Miles wandered into an Episcopal church in San Francisco, someone handed her a hunk of communion bread, and she says, "the next thing I knew I was eating Jesus." (She talks with the undignified speech of convert!) Within a year she'd led that church to open a Food Pantry in their sanctuary, and along with the homeless poor, drug addicts, illegal immigrants, parolees and parishioners, they feed more than eight hundred people each week.

She writes, "In church on Sundays, and at the food pantry on Fridays, I found myself overwhelmed by the implications of the incarnation – the inescapable physicality and humanity of a God who should have known better than to dwell in this muck with us. I craved the deepening meaning Jesus brought to my life. But to get there I had to get over myself. I realized

how my continuing conversion depended on being thrown together in intimate ways with all kinds of strangers I hadn't chosen. Being the body of Christ didn't allow a lot of room for sentimentality or waffling, and didn't depend on my ability or failure to like any particular individual. It just demanded a new heart from me, a new way of seeing other people....If Jesus is about anything," she says, "it's the inconvenient truth that a spiritual life is a physical life. The people I met were Jesus' body: suffering, feeding each other, healing the sick, forgiving one another, rising out of death. Their freaky hands and legs and backs were doing his work, carrying his power through the world." (4)

You know, those of us who inherited our faith, and have been raised in the church, sometimes find ourselves apologetic that we never had a lightening bolt conversion experience. But I tell you what – if someone were to ask you when you were saved, here's your answer: I was saved in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 11, because that was the moment when – faith in Jesus Christ was offered to the world, and moved beyond the limited confines of the religious folks in Jesus' time. That's when the old saying, "For God so loved the world," began to spread to the ends of the earth, and to include me. AMEN.

#### NOTES

- 1) Sara Miles, *Jesus Freak: feeding – healing – raising the dead*, p. xvi ff.
- 2) Stephen Jones, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 2*, p. 451.
- 3) Will Willimon, *Acts*, p. 96.
- 4) Sara Miles, p. xvii.