

“Nobody Expects Spanish Inquisition”

Sermon – May 5, 2024 Stone Presbyterian Church

“That is not a sermon title I ever expected” is probably what half of you thought when you saw it in the newsletter or the bulletin. The other half probably just shook your head and said, “There he goes again.” Frankly, I felt both ways myself last night when trying to write the sermon. Fifty years ago, literally, my friends—guys, of course—had stumbled upon a British show being shown on PBS called, “Monty Python’s Flying Circus”, an absurdist, steam-of-consciousness comedy sketch show. We were obsessed with it and the quite oddball sketches that even today we quote when we talk with one other.

When you are being subject to excessive questioning or interrogation and get irritated by it, you might use the expression, “Well, I wasn’t expecting the Spanish Inquisition.” Monty Python took that and had three guys in red cardinal cloaks rush in and say, <pause> “Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition.” And then they were quite silly.

So naturally, it only made sense to my brain to reference a half-century old comedy sketch that appealed to a limited audience even then for a sermon title here in 2024.

So why did my brain go to that sketch for today’s scripture passages?

Well, it was today’s passage from Acts.

Acts chapter 10 is about Cornelius, a Roman centurion but a worshipper of Yahweh who has a vision from God about Peter coming, and about Peter who has a vision from God telling him it is OK to eat non-kosher food and to visit Cornelius, a Gentile (non-Jew).

They have a meet-cute, exchanging their visions. Then Peter realizes Christ is for everyone and preaches that message to them, which in our lectionary cycle I actually did on Easter Sunday.

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That passage ends with verse 43 and Peter saying, “All the prophets testify about [Christ] that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Then we start with today’s passage from verses 44 and 45, “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”.

It was if the God said, “Nobody expects the Spirit’s dispensation.”

Last week we heard about the Ethiopian eunuch being baptized and now a Roman centurion and his family. The Good News is breaking out from the confines of a specifically chosen people; God has decided that all people are chosen.

At the end of Matthew’s gospel Jesus tells his apostles, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

And yet, in Acts all the disciples hang around Jerusalem; only Peter goes to the Gentiles—and not enthusiastically.

It appears God senses that and after Peter shares the Good News about Jesus, God doesn’t wait for Peter to say anything more but immediately sends the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles in Peter’s presence along with fellow Jews as witnesses.

Peter is left having to react to this in real-time and forced to acknowledge to the world and to himself, “Can anyone (including me) withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

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To his credit he does order them to be baptized. But he never appears to be overly comfortable about it; he’s too much stuck in his old ways, though less than his fellow disciples. The disciples end up agreeing that Paul and others should evangelize to the Gentiles while they focus on the Jews.

God works in God’s way. And God’s way always seems to be expanding, knocking down barriers that we put up—cultural, ethnic, and others.

Unlike the synoptics, in John’s gospel Jesus does not speak about the commandments to love God and to love your neighbor. Instead, he uniquely gives a “new” commandment: to love one another.

As today’s lessons from 1 John the epistle and John the gospel tell us, love—God’s love for us—is the basis for this ever expanding circle of inclusivity.

In John’s gospel Jesus did not die as an atonement for sins but as a proof of God’s love toward humanity. And if God loves us that much, we should surely do the same with each other.

As God incarnate, Jesus of Nazareth, tells his disciples “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Note that Jesus does not say, “Lay down your life for me” but “for your friends.”

In the book of Acts, and the epistles in general, people come to Christ because they have heard the good news and the Spirit comes upon them. At no time is anyone coerced into becoming a Christ-follower.

But after church gained the power that came with the Roman Empire adopting it as the state religion, we tended to lose sight of God’s message.

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The Spanish Inquisition, for example, was a judicial institution that lasted between 1478 and 1834—356 years. Its ostensible purpose was to combat heresy in Spain, but, in practice, it resulted in consolidating power in the monarchy of the newly unified Spanish kingdom. Its brutal methods led to widespread death and suffering. Around 150,000 people were prosecuted for various offences of whom between 3,000 and 5,000 were executed.

And, incidentally, the Inquisition gave you a 30-day notice that you were to be investigated to give you time to make arrangements. It was never unexpected.

In 2021 on today’s passage from Acts, Clarke Dixon, a pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Cobourg, Ontario wrote an article entitled “Time to Make Christianity Great Again?”

In Acts 1 the disciples ask Jesus, “Lord, has the time come for you to free Israel and restore our kingdom?” and Jesus responds it is not for them to know. Then in response to Peter baptizing the Gentiles here in Acts 10, Dixon writes,

“If there was any doubt before, there was no doubt now, that Jesus’ purpose was not about making Israel great again, but about making the world great at last, fulfilling the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 that “All the families on earth will be blessed through you”. This fulfillment of the promise challenges us in our desire to make Christianity great again.”

As pastor, theologian, and anti-Nazi dissident Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “The world exercises dominion by force and Christ and Christians conquer by service.”

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We are not called to convert; we called to proclaim the Good News. Let God take care of the rest. Because Jesus told us what he expects of us, “These things I command you, that you love one another.”

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.
Amen.