

“There goes the neighbourhood.” A while ago, with our family in socially distanced lawn chairs in their front drive; grandkids, neighbour kids racing, running, colouring chalk on the walk. Down the block, a neighbour’s house for sale. And the residents of the neighbourhood like a protective mother hen watching the real estate agent, and a minute later as a vehicle pulled up at the house. Right away, everyone was sizing them up. A young couple. That was good. Did they have kids? Even better. This was a family-friendly, kids-abounding street; everyone knew right when they turned the corner; to slow to 20km per hour. The kids would be out. So whoever was going to move in; they may as well know right away, what kind of neighbourhood this is.

And then the showing was over. Everyone relaxed. We joked that we should move in; how much fun it would be to live just down the street. Our son-in-law took a long sip of his beer, said, “Well, there goes the neighbourhood...” It was funny, but then again, not. The expressions we use and often joke about have a much deeper truth. We want people in our neighbourhoods to have things in common; to share the same values we do. We want to feel safe about the guy living next door. To protect what is ours—home, family, the junk in our garages; the stuff of our lives.

There goes the neighbourhood... By the time we reach Acts 10 today, a lot has transpired. Pentecost has come and gone. Peter has changed from bumbling disciple to bold preacher and healer. The Spirit of God has been moving and changing and challenging the edges of temple gates and church tradition. Philip baptizes an outsider—the Ethiopian eunuch who understands that the waters of baptism are not merely reserved for qualifying insiders. While in the middle of it all Peter is beginning to have dreams. Nightmares about breaking with tradition and categories of what is clean and unclean—radical dreams of radical

inclusion and a changing world. And now, up to speed, we arrive at the house of Cornelius, a Roman. A centurion. An outsider—but devout, faithful. Interesting... And the Spirit of God is moving again. Throwing wide open the gates and doors, bursting through walled buildings and hearts of stone, pouring into the hearts and lives of people no one wants moving in just down the block. Well, like I said... “There goes the neighbourhood. Let us pray.

Peter couldn't believe he was here. Standing at the door. About to go into a home he would never have entered. Because the tradition law forbade it. In fact, it was unlawful. Arrest worthy... People outside the law; Gentiles—nice enough if you saw them in the street—they were deemed ritually, spiritually, religiously unclean. People you don't associate with. People you avoid. And while we don't think we make those distinctions anymore; we know we do. That there are people; with just a glance, we already decide are not ones to associate ourselves with; people we don't consider included in our own faith tradition, the ones we protect our kids from; people in our minds outside God's grace.

Anyway, here he was—Peter—at the door of a Gentile home. Not just any Gentile. This was Caesarea, the Roman capital, the center of a foreign government; and foreign faiths too. And the man at the other side of the door—Cornelius—was a high-ranking centurion, a Roman's Roman. So, this was not simply “A” Gentile household. It was REALLY a Gentile household!ⁱ And way out of Peter's comfort zone! Even though he had been preaching otherwise. Wasn't it one of the first things Peter spoke after the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost? When the wind blew and there were flames of fire and he spoke in languages he never heard, let alone learned, or understood. Peter's pronouncement was that God's Spirit would be poured out on all nations and peoples.ⁱⁱ How and when did he think that was going

to happen? And well, I guess it's one thing to say something; to pay it lip service; it's another to actually accept it. It's like, "Put your money where your mouth is Peter."

Anyway, here Peter stands at a Roman centurion's door, broad daylight, no doubt being sized up and smack-dab in Gentile-land; people he had been taught all his life to avoid. Heart thumping wildly, cold sweat beading on his forehead; stomach wrenching, a very bad taste in his mouth. As if he had actually eaten all those creatures on that lowered bedsheet that appeared in his dream. All the unclean animals that came down from heaven in that vision from God. Like lobster or pork. Gross! 3 times the sheet was set down before him in that vision. 3 times, a voice said, "Rise up and eat." 3 times he said, "Nope. Not gonna happen, God. In case you hadn't noticed, "Unclean!!!" And 3 times the voice again, "What God has made clean, don't call unclean."

God makes a good case. Who was he to argue? Could it be that some restrictions and traditions run their course, serve a purpose for some times but not all times? He wasn't sure. But after trying hard to resist this new thing God's Spirit was setting before him—finally Peter gives a little ground. Makes a compromise.ⁱⁱⁱ "Ok God, I get it, but I don't have to like it. Now I truly understand God shows no partiality." And God's timing is impeccable. Right at that moment—messengers. Romans. Outsiders. "Cornelius sent us," they said. "An angel said to send for you. So here we are." "Go with them," God told Peter. So here he was. Never knowing as quickly as he said those fated words—that God shows no partiality—that just as quick God would lead him here this new thing, this door.

And no time to knock or anything, the door flies wide open. Cornelius expounds on the vision of his own. So ecstatic that God answered his prayer, so in wonder that God would throw wide-open a welcome and place for him—overcome by the moment, Cornelius falls to

his knees in worship before Peter. “Don’t worship me,” Peter says. “Worship Jesus, the crucified, resurrected Son of God. Worship God, who truly shows no partiality...” From Peter’s lips to God’s ears. God doesn’t wait for Peter to finish his sermon. Doesn’t wait for a precise theological explanation. God doesn’t even wait to follow baptismal protocol. “God acts. God pours out the Holy Spirit on Cornelius—his slaves, messengers, wife, children—his entire household receives the gift of God’s limitless door-busting power. And if it’s not immediately clear to Peter and Cornelius that God’s intent in bringing them together is to break down barriers; it becomes abundantly so following the outpouring of God’s Spirit.”^{iv} And, well, there goes the neighbourhood. Seems God will let anyone move in.

And Peter? He is stunned! Stumbling for words. Doesn’t know what to do. Not that this kind of thing—the outpouring of the Holy Spirit before baptism—hadn’t happened before. It was exactly Pentecost all over again. But Peter had no qualms then. He invited all who had received the Spirit to be baptized right then and there. But then again, they were all insiders. Today was an entirely different story. And Peter, bold preacher; reverts back to the hoof-in-mouth bumbling disciple we fondly knew him to be. Peter says the first thing that comes to mind. “Um, I guess, well, I don’t know... Can anyone withhold the water of baptism for these who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” Like the “Speak now, or forever hold your peace,” at a wedding; it’s Peter’s last-ditch attempt to deny the Spirit of God, to resist this new thing God’s Spirit was setting before him, to thwart God’s action and plan; the extent of God’s radical inclusion and love. “Can anyone, anyone, give me a good reason?”

Last week it was an Ethiopian Eunuch who challenged the assumption of the disciples and the early believers of the day. The presumption that creeps in and has solid root in our traditions and rules of faith too. That the established church possesses the power to withhold

water for baptism; possesses the power to withhold God's grace, God's Spirit, God's inclusion to anyone. Yet, the intervention and the pouring out of God's Spirit on a Roman household declares otherwise; prohibits any notion of Easter or Pentecost that maintains the established status quo^v of the 1st and 21st centuries and anything in between. And while Baptism with water and Spirit is truly a gift of God for us, for the church, for all people—a gift from God that opens wide the space of God's grace for us all—this story tells us it's not the only way God can act. The unexpected gift of the Holy Spirit to an unexpected community at an unexpected time calls into question our human tendencies to protect "our" neighbourhood, our values, the stuff of our lives and faith; the junk in our garages—perhaps useful once in a different context—but never meant for all times. And in the process, we place limits on; we fence in the power of God.^{vi}

But God will do what God will do. And that truth—that God does and will do what God will do—is the true Gospel we so need to hear. In an ever-changing world, the last thing we need is a static, limited, status quo God. In uncertain and fearful times like these; the last thing we need is a God who picks and chooses who to save and who not to. Like Cornelius, we all need to know the God who hears our prayers; who answers in ways we don't expect or understand. Like Cornelius, Peter, and all of us, we need the God who will lead us out of our comfort zones **and** out of our fears. Because life does not dwell in comfort zones, or status quo, or in masqueraded fear of who or what we don't understand.

But true life comes in our God who reaches beyond all the barriers that yet separate us from God and one another. True life comes in our God who moves into our neighbourhoods; who comes in Jesus who breaks down all the barriers of death and the grave to be and to bring and to give God's resurrecting power of life for all. Our God who—while we yet wait to

celebrate **a** day and season of Pentecost—our God comes to say that every day is a Pentecost day. And God is calling us to radical new dreams of radical inclusion, of a changing world—changing because of the new things God is setting before us in the resurrected life of Jesus and outpouring of God’s Spirit for the life of us all.

God’s Spirit is already spilling into our neighbourhoods and streets; already pouring out life and breath and healing and welcome and inclusion right where we need it most—beyond our church doors, temple gates, human-made solutions and understandings. Right in the midst of COVID and fear and restriction. Into the places of our deepest need, and our deepest divisions. God is always on the move, still at work in the world, stretching our identity, our loyalties, stretching our love and hope, in response to the resurrected Jesus.^{vii} Right on our doorstep; God does not only pay lip service to, but puts all of Christ’s life and love on the line. God acts. God does what God does. God turns onto our street. God moves in. Moves in for life. And there goes the neighbourhood. Amen.

ⁱ Jerusha Matsen Neal, www.workingpreacher.org May 2021

ⁱⁱ Jacob Myers, www.workingpreacher.org May 2012

ⁱⁱⁱ Amy Lindeman Allen, www.workingpreacher.org May 2018

^{iv} Ibid

^v Ibid

^{vi} Amy Lindeman Allen, www.workingpreacher.org May 2018

^{vii} Jerusha Matsen Neal, www.workingpreacher.org May 2021