

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
St. Francisville, LA 70775

Acts 10:44-48

Two apples up in a tree were looking down on the world. The first apple said, "Look at all those people fighting, robbing, rioting -- no one seems willing to get along with his fellow man. Someday we apples will be the only ones left. Then we'll rule the world. Replied the second apple, "Which of us -- the reds or the greens?" (Gene Brown in Danbury, Con., News-Times).

The Gospel story of Jesus of Nazareth is the unifying factor that eliminates all differences between people on the basis of color, race, nationality, gender, age, socio-economic status, or even level of education. Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, the Redeemer of the World, once and for all and for all ages eliminated the differences that separate brother from brother and sister from sister. In him we are all one, endowed with same rights, privileges and responsibilities as sons and daughters of the same loving Father. In Him, all of us whether black or white, man or woman, child or adult, rich or poor, tall or Fr. Roman... we are all heirs of his kingdom, brothers and sisters, and equal members of his body, the Church.

But, my friends, in many ways we are still living in a world filled with "Sneetches". I am talking about my favorite characters created by Dr. Seuss. You know the story of the Sneetches, don't you? If you don't, let me read a few verses for you:

Now, the Star-Belly Sneetches had bellies with stars.
The Plain-Belly Sneetches had none upon thars.
Those stars weren't so big. They were really so small.
You might think such a thing wouldn't matter at all.

But, because they had stars, all the Star-Belly Sneetches
Would brag, "We're the best kind of Sneetch on the beaches."
With their snoots in the air, they would sniff and they'd snort
"We'll have nothing to do with the Plain-Belly sort!"
And, whenever they met some, when they were out walking,
They'd hike right on past them without even talking.

When the Star-Belly children went out to play ball,
Could a Plain Belly get in the game? Not at all.

You only could play if your bellies had stars
And the Plain-Belly children had none upon thars.

Anyone well acquainted with history can attest that in every generation there is always at least one group of people others consider of unequal value, unworthy of redemption, the undesirable, the “other”. Loving parents warn their children to be careful around those people and to be mindful not to associate with them. They are not like us, we are much better than they are, and life is better for everyone if we remember that.

We see this in Holy Scripture as well. The prophet Jonah whines to God, “I knew you would be merciful to those people”. God had given him a command to go and preach a Gospel of repentance to the sinful Ninevites, but Jonah felt profound hatred for them and attempted to block God’s plan of redemption by running in the opposite direction. He did not feel that the Ninevites were worthy of redemption. They were the wicked, the pagan, the Gentiles. They were the enemy, they were the “other”. They were the Plain Belly Sneetches.

In today’s reading from Acts of the Apostles we have a similar story. The brief story today starts, “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.” Well, let me back up a little and answer the obvious questions, “Who was Peter speaking to, where is he, and what is he doing there?”. The unit we see here starts back in Chapter 9 verse 32.

Let me describe the context briefly for you. Peter is in Joppa, staying at the house of Simon the Tanner. At some point, while doing his noon-day prayer on the terrace, he feels hunger and a vision appears to him. He sees a great sheet held on the four corners, coming down from heaven. On the sheet are all sorts of four-legged animals. He hears the voice of God telling him, “Peter, kill and eat”. Peter believes this might be a test of his adherence to the covenant, so he replies, “Let it not be so. Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is impure”. God then says, “Don’t call impure what I have deemed clean”.

Right after this, three emissaries of Cornelius, a Centurion of the Italian Cohort, come to the house looking for Peter. Cornelius too has had a vision in which God has asked him to send for Peter to preach the Gospel to him and his household. Peter realized that God was calling him to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles, a people he has always considered outside of God’s Covenants, ceremonially impure, the undesirable. He himself starts his speech to Cornelius by saying in verse 28, “You yourselves 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”.

Peter proceeds to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ to Cornelius and to his entire household. While he was still speaking, the Holy Spirit descended upon those who were listening to him and they began to worship God and to speak in foreign tongues. Some of the people who had come with Peter, who had grown up thinking of the Gentiles as “Plain-Belly Sneetches” are astounded that the Holy Spirit would come to such people. This was not supposed to happen. They were astounded that this gift would fall, “even on the Gentiles”. This made no sense, “they had no stars upon thars”.

Peter’s preaching and baptism of Cornelius and his household today is good news for us. God’s tendency to choose the unlikeliest of characters and to draw them to himself is very comforting to me. We too come from Gentile roots. None of us is a direct descendant of Abraham, Isaac or Jacob. Our family trees have other roots, roots that a good Jew of the first century would consider pagan or gentile. But, here we are, sharing in the great inheritance of the Saints. Gathered as a body, breaking the bread and drinking from the communal cup, together being fed by Christ’s word, Christ’s body and Christ’s blood. Here we are, claiming an inheritance that is ours because we have been adopted into God’s chosen nation, because Christ came into the world to save sinners.

We often say, “I have chosen to follow Jesus”, or “I love God”, or “I have chosen to be a Christian”, but, as important as these statements are, they are not Gospel. The Gospel always has God for the subject and what he has done for us as the action of the subject. The Gospel story is that God chooses us. The Gospel message is that God loves us. The Gospel truth is what God has done, is doing, and will do for us in the person and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. The Great news is that even though we are no better than the Ninevites, God draws us to himself, God calls us to inherit his Kingdom, God sacrifices his only Son for us, God makes us all equal in his eyes.

We are all equal and we are all precious in God’s eyes. But, my friends, many of us still believe that the world is divided into two types of people, the “us” and the “them”. In his autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi wrote that after reading the Gospels he found there the solution for the caste system in his country. “So one Sunday he decided to attend services at a nearby church and talk to the minister about becoming a Christian. When he entered the sanctuary, however, the usher refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go worship with his own people. Gandhi left the church and never returned. ‘If Christians have caste differences also,’ he said, ‘I might as well remain a Hindu.’” (Our Daily Bread, March 6, 1994.)

I wonder how many Gandhi’s have left our Christian churches never to return. I wonder if any people have left through those doors never to return. I wonder if there are any people right outside those doors, waiting to be invited in? People who like Cornelius

and his family, are in need of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and in need of his baptism. Acts of the Apostles invites us today to reflect about our own prejudices and to become obedient to Christ's Great Commission to preach the Gospel to the ends of the world. There are many in our communities who are in desperate need of a Savior and a friend. Christ today calls us to go to them, even if we need to get out of our comfort zone and venture into unknown, uncharted territory.

The story of the Sneetches ends on a positive note. After loosing all their money in corrective treatment to have stars put on or taken out of their belies, the Sneetches finally came to the following conclusion:

But McBean was quite wrong. I'm quite happy to say.
That the Sneetches got really quite smart on that day.
The day they decided that Sneetches are Sneetches.
And no kind of Sneetch is the best on the beaches.
That day, all the Sneetches forgot about stars and whether
They had one, or not, upon thars.

Christ calls us to see his face in the face of others, even those people we have learned to distrust, even those people we feel are not as good as we are. I pray that we all will listen, after all, the Kingdom of God belongs to the least of his people. Amen!