

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

One of the worst things that you can hear in just about any setting is “We’ve never done it that way before.” It’s a terrible thing to hear in a business setting or a community setting, but more important than that, it is a terrible thing to hear in a church. The idea that “we’ve never done it that way before” when accompanied by a dogged determination of “and you can forget about doing it that way now” is a sure sign that decline and death are just around the corner.

But decline and death are not what God has in mind for his church or his people. As a matter of fact, we are made to grow and expand our understandings. We are called to reach out in new ways so that we may share the love of God with all of God’s children. Wherever we find ourselves.

That old song, “Give me that old time religion” is dangerous. Especially if we hold to the verse that says, “It was good for Paul and Silas, so it’s good enough for me.” Because if we hold to this kind of thinking as the truth, we will find ourselves trying to put God into a box. And, let me tell you, God doesn’t like being put into a box.

The early church in Jerusalem along with the Disciples were guilty of trying to put God in a box. They were convinced that the message that Jesus brought was a message that was solely for the Jewish people. They believed that in order to be a true follower of Christ, that you needed to be a true follower of the Jewish Law. The law that dictated what was kosher... what was clean and most importantly, what was unclean. They expected that men would need to be

circumcised and that all would follow all of the regulations that came with keeping kosher.

What they didn't understand was that God had a different plan... a plan that would turn their world on its ear. It started with Phillip and his encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. It continued with Paul as this Jew's Jew became the foremost preacher of the Gospel, the Good News, to the Gentiles. It continued with Peter as we hear it described in this morning's lesson.

It seems that there was a Roman Centurion named Cornelius who worshipped God. In a vision he was told to send for Peter who was staying in Joppa with Simon, the Tanner. Cornelius did as he was told and sent some of his men to fetch Peter. In the meantime, Peter had gone to the rooftop of Simon's house to pray around lunchtime. Peter was hungry. And as he prayed, he saw a vision of sheet descending from heaven. Just like a picnic blanket, it was loaded down with all sorts of animals. As he looked at this vision, he heard a voice tell him to kill and eat. But Peter, being the good Jew that he was, said that he couldn't do that because the animals were unclean according to the Jewish purity and dietary laws. The voice told him that "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

When the men reach Peter and tell him to come to Cornelius, he makes plans to leave the next day. When Peter arrives at Cornelius' home, he finds that his entire family is there with him. And he begins to tell them of Jesus and as he is preaching to them, they are filled with the Holy Spirit. In this outpouring of the Spirit, Peter baptizes them all in the name of Jesus.

This leads to him getting called on the carpet by the believers in Jerusalem, but when Peter describes the entire event to them, they rejoice that God cannot be contained and will call whomever God wishes to call.

The church in Jerusalem was ready to write off all sorts of people that didn't fit their idea of who should receive God's grace and favor. We'd never done it that way before has been a mantra of the church from the beginning. But, as Peter and the others were soon to find out, God could not be contained. Within the lifetime of the Apostles, the Good News of Christ had spread throughout the middle East and into parts of the Far Eastern countries, throughout Western Europe, Northern Africa and into the British Isles.

God's surprising work continues today... often with our participation, but frequently in spite of our lack of participation. God cannot be contained. More importantly, God will not be contained and will work whether we participate or not.

Peter and the leaders of the early church were ready to write off a large part of the population because they didn't do things the way that the leaders thought that they should. But God had other plans.

There are times that the church in our day writes people off, but God has other plans for them and for us and those plans will come to fruition whether we like it or not. It won't be the first time that the church has been brought kicking and screaming into the reality of God's love and concern for the whole world.

The late Dr. Fred Craddock, while lecturing at Yale University told of going back one summer to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, to take a short vacation with his wife. One night they found a quiet little restaurant where they looked forward to a private meal - just the two of them.

While they were waiting for their meal they noticed a distinguished looking, white-haired man moving from table to table, visiting guests. Craddock whispered to his wife, "I hope he doesn't come over here." He didn't want the man to intrude on their privacy. But the man did come by his table.

"Where you folks from?" he asked amicably.

"Oklahoma."

"Splendid state, I hear, although I've never been there. What do you do for a living?"

"I teach homiletics at the graduate seminary of Phillips University."

"Oh, so you teach preachers, do you. Well, I've got a story I want to tell you." And with that he pulled up a chair and sat down at the table with Craddock and his wife.

Dr. Craddock said he groaned inwardly: Oh no, here comes another preacher story. It seems everyone has one.

The man stuck out his hand. "I'm Ben Hooper. I was born not far from here across the mountains. My mother wasn't married when I was born so I had a hard time. When I started to school my classmates had a name for me, and it wasn't a very nice name. I used to go off by myself at recess and during lunchtime because the taunts of my playmates cut so deeply.

"What was worse was going downtown on Saturday afternoon and feeling every eye burning a hole through you. They were all wondering just who my real father was.

"When I was about 12 years old a new preacher came to our church. I would always go in late and slip out early. But one day the preacher said the benediction so fast I got caught and had to walk out with the crowd. I could feel every eye in church on me. Just about the time I got to the door I felt a big hand on my shoulder. I looked up and the preacher was looking right at me.

"Who are you, son? Whose boy are you?"

I felt the old weight come on me. It was like a big black cloud. Even the preacher was putting me down.

But as he looked down at me, studying my face, he began to smile a big smile of recognition. "Wait a minute," he said, "I know who you are. I see the family resemblance. You are a child of God."

With that he slapped me across the rump and said, "Boy you've got a great inheritance. Go and claim it."

The old man looked across the table at Fred Craddock and said, "That was the most important single sentence ever said to me." With that he smiled, shook the hands of Craddock and his wife, and moved on to another table to greet old friends.

Suddenly, Fred Craddock remembered. On two occasions the people of Tennessee had elected an illegitimate son to be their governor. One of them was Ben Hooper...a man with a great inheritance.

And so it is with us. Each one of us is a child of God. Each one of us has the imprint of the *Imago Dei*, the image of the living God living within us. And no one can tell us otherwise.

We are loved by God. And nothing... nothing, can change that.

Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.