

Does anyone object? Anyone? Anyone?

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[Acts 10:44-48](#), Psalm 98, 1 John 5:1-6, John 15:9-17

When I had a class on performing marriages. I remember that the person teaching us gave us a few pieces of practical advice. They said to never marry anybody who was drunk, because you have to be sober to sign a binding contract. They taught us that you had to keep the photographer on a short leash. And they said to never wait too long when you ask that “Does anyone object?” question.

No One Wants an Answer

You have to ask the question, but despite what you see in the movies, you never want somebody to answer it. Nobody wants the whole drama of that scene where somebody comes in and says, “No they need to marry me instead!” That’s going to do nothing but cause trouble on somebody’s wedding day.

And it’s even worse if somebody comes forward claiming to have a valid legal reason for why the marriage shouldn’t take place. Because, if they do, that has to be sorted out before anything else can happen. So, you just ask the question, and you hope against hope that nobody uses it as a last-ditch opportunity to throw the whole wedding off the rails.

How You Ask

But I always feel that millisecond of temptation. What if I actually searched for an answer to that question. “Come on, there’s got to be somebody who objects. How about you sir? You look like somebody who might have a reason for why these two should not be bound in holy matrimony. What is it?” But no, I always play it safe and do my best to make sure that question slips by without incident.

I was thinking about all of that when I looked at our reading from the Book of Acts this morning because the question that Peter asks in it is a lot like that question that I’m supposed to ask at a wedding. **“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”** It basically comes as that one last question that you need to deal with before we can get on with a marriage ceremony – concluding it, not with the sharing of rings but with the covenant of baptism. So, you might expect that it would be asked much like the minister asks the question at a wedding. But I wonder if Peter really asked it like that.

A Romance?

After all, this question does not really come at the end of some romantic tale. It is not as if the Peter and this Gentile household have had a whirlwind love affair leading up to this point. There has been no courting or falling in love. On the contrary, Peter has resisted at every step of this relationship.

It all started when Cornelius, the patriarch of this Italian family, had a vision. Cornelius, is described as a God-fearer, that is, a Gentile who worships and admires the God of Israel, but does not follow all of the requirements of Jewish law concerning circumcision and things like diet. But in this vision, he is told to



send for Simon Peter who will instruct him about what he should do.

What it Takes for Peter to Go

Now this, you would think, should be an opportunity that Peter would jump at. The apostles, after all, have been instructed to preach the good news about Jesus to the ends of the earth. That command is in the opening chapter of this book! And here Peter has a golden opportunity to access a whole new people group with this meeting that has been set up by heavenly messengers. But surprisingly, Peter seems to be nothing but reluctant.

While Cornelius' messengers are on the way to give him the invitation, Peter receives his own vision. He sees a sheet lowered from heaven filled with animals. But the animals are all considered to be unclean according to Jewish law. As a good Jew, Peter has been taught all his life that such animals are disgusting and that no decent person would ever eat them. And so, when, in his vision, he hears the voice of God say, "**Get up, Peter; kill and eat,**" he basically replies and says "Yuck, I would never eat such things!" And Peter has this same vision three times in a row.

And when, at the conclusion of the third time through this vision, the messengers from Cornelius show up at the door asking for Simon Peter, the interpretation of the vision seems clear. Even though these Gentiles may be dirty and eat disgusting things, it seems that God wants Peter to go visit them anyways.

Peter's Reluctance

But just think for a moment about what that means. God had to send a vision to Peter not once, not twice but three times just to persuade him to go out the door towards the home of Cornelius. Peter didn't want to do it and he needed some pretty extraordinary persuasion just to get in the chariot.

But he goes. And when he gets to the house, he does share with them the good news about Jesus. He has gotten into a bit of a groove in his preaching at this point. But he doesn't seem to speak with any great expectation. They're just a bunch of filthy Gentiles after all. He doesn't really think that this good news is for them. It's only for people like him.

That seems to be his entire attitude because, when these Gentiles begin to respond in an undeniable way – when they start to speak in an ecstatic manner – all the people who have come with him are completely astounded. They were never looking for such a reaction and there is no indication that Peter feels any differently.

How did He Ask it?

And so, I don't think we can necessarily assume that, when Peter asks the question, "**Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?**" he asks it like we ask the question at a wedding. Doesn't it make more sense that he's speaking to his posse and saying something like, "Listen, guys, I realize that it looks like these *Gentiles* have received the Holy Spirit like we have, but surely somebody can come up with some reason to withhold the water for baptizing them." The problem with a written story, after all, you never quite know with what expression somebody says something.

And the thing is that there were all kinds of reasons, according to their existing understanding of baptism, to withhold the water for baptism. Gentiles were not circumcised, they ate unclean foods, they did not follow the purity laws that defined the people of Israel. These were all potential red flags at the

wedding ceremony, all reasons for raising objections. But the reason why nobody raised those points was that it was actually about something else.

They didn't like Gentiles. They had these stereotypes and bad feelings about them that they couldn't get past. But somehow, with the help of the Holy Spirit acting in the lives of this Gentile family, they knew they had to give this relationship a try. But let us not pretend for a moment that any of this was easy for them. It was very hard. And so, I don't think it unlikely that, even up to the last moment, Peter was still looking for an excuse to stop the whole ceremony.

Part of Our History

And, in many ways, that is a perfect reflection of the history of the church. God is always on the move seeking for the church to grow by drawing more people into it. The good news about Jesus Christ is and always has been good news for everybody. We can find hope. We can find forgiveness where we need it. We can find ways to lay down the burdens that we are carrying and that keep us from being the people that God has always intended for us to be. That is always going to be something that is going to meet a whole lot of people exactly where they need to be met. The problem when it comes to drawing people to Christ is never the message.

The problem is often us, however. We are always on the lookout for reasons to withhold water for baptizing. And it is not because God is putting up those barriers. God is not the one who is saying that this type of person or that type of person has no place in the kingdom of God. We do that.

The most common reflex that we have is the same one that Peter started out with. We assume that if people are not like us, then we shouldn't have to make a place for them.

Many Kinds of Prejudice

That sense of somebody not being like us can take many different forms. I am quite sure that at least some of the reluctance of people like Peter to include the Gentiles had as much to do with racial and cultural stereotypes as it did with questions about the requirements of the law. And that is a barrier that has continued to stand in the way of the growth of the church throughout its history.

Oh, we will often say that we are only too glad to welcome people of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, but we also often erect hidden and even overt barriers. Many times, Christian leaders have required people from various backgrounds to give up their cultural heritage, in order to be considered acceptable.

Indigenous Culture

Churches in Canada, for example, including our own, often demanded that indigenous people give up their drums and cut their long hair and braids that were such an essential part of their identity, in order to be considered acceptable Christians. Even churches that made abundant use of incense smoke in their worship, declared that the indigenous use of the smoke of cedar, tobacco, sweet grass and sage were abominations.

We demanded that the First Nations people become culturally like us in order to be acceptable. And it is always so easy to fall into that same pattern when we encounter people who come from various ethnicities and cultures.

European settlers who colonized this place came here with the notion that their culture and practices made them superior and that everyone else would need to become like them to be acceptable. We should have learned by now how foolish such ideas were, but we still so easily fall into such ways of

seeing the world. And so, we still often assume that someone has to become culturally European to be worthy of the gospel.

Other Reasons

So, demanding cultural assimilation is one of those ways that, historically and still today, we subtly withhold the water. But different cultural backgrounds are not the only reason why we sometimes struggle to give people a place.

In many cases, we have built our churches around certain assumptions about how families are supposed to work. And so, we might make it fairly easy for a family that fits certain traditional patterns, like, for example, a traditionally married couples with kids. But we really struggle when it comes to families that don't quite fit our traditional expectations. Single-parent families, blended families and families that just don't fit what we might be used to are given extra barriers when it comes to fitting in.

Oh, once again, it might be subtle and it might only be communicated with a glance or a stray comment, but we do find ways to make it more difficult for those who don't quite fit our expectations.

God Doesn't Want to Exclude

The lesson that I would have all of us take away from the story of Peter and Cornelius and his family is this. God doesn't want to exclude anybody. God doesn't want to set up any barriers between people and the good news that's going to bring some hope and light into their lives. The problem with the spread of the gospel has never been on God's end or any sort of problem or unacceptability with the message.

The problem is us. The problem is that we, like Peter and the others, are constantly looking for some reason to withhold the water. And God is always pushing, sending us messages encouraging us to go out and encounter people where they are. God is not going to let up from sending that message of inclusion two or three times if that's what we need for it to get through.

But maybe what we need to do is stop looking for reasons to withhold the water, stop finding excuses for why somebody can't really belong, and just go ahead and take the risk. It is time to love, accept and value people for who they already are.

That's the power of the gospel. And when we set it free to truly speak to any person's life wherever they are, here is what we will discover. It doesn't just have the power to transform that person's life and bring them hope. It also has the power to transform the church as a whole and bring us all to new life in Christ. Having heard no objections, let the wedding proceed!