

Surprised  
May 13, 2012  
Acts 10:44-48

*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, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.*

Change can be a difficult thing to manage - and like a stubborn old mule we sometimes would rather dig in our heels and resist it all together. I stumbled upon an interesting old letter found in the pages of history. It was written by Martin Van Buren, the governor of New York. It was dated January 31, 1829. It was addressed to President Andrew Jackson:

*President Jackson,*

*The canal system of this country is being threatened by the spread of a new form of transportation known as railroads. The federal government must preserve the canals for the following reasons.*

*One, if boats are supplanted by railroads, serious unemployment will result. Captains, cooks, drivers, hostlers, repairmen and lock tenders will be left without means of livelihood, not to mention the numerous farmers now growing hay for horses.*

*Two, boat builders would suffer and towline, whip, and harness makers would be left destitute.*

*Three, canal boats are absolutely essential to the defense of the United States. In the event of the expected trouble with England, the Erie Canal would be the only means by which we could ever move the supplies so vital to waging modern war.*

*As you may well know, Mr. President, railroad carriages are pulled at the enormous speed of fifteen miles per hour by engines which, in addition to endangering life and limb of passengers, roar and snort their way through the countryside, setting fire to crops, scaring the livestock and frightening women and children. The Almighty certainly never intended that people should travel at such breakneck speed.*

*Sincerely Yours,  
Martin Van Buren*

Such a letter, and such resistance, is comical to look back upon today. Especially in an age when one can eat breakfast on one coast and lunch on the other in the same day.

There are many episodes from history that we could look at and see how people resisted change to the point they were willing to commit murder to defend their position. Look at the civil war and the resistance to treating African Americans as fully human. The same is true for the women's suffrage movement. "What if women voted?" It was a power that many men did not want to give up. Can you imagine, as a woman, not being able to vote?

And then the civil rights movement. "What if those dirty black kids were in the same school as my kids?" And all kinds of evil was spewed by those who could not tolerate such change. And today, we now have the ADA, Americans With Disabilities Act, which guarantees accessibility standards for public places and all new construction. We have gone from pitying the handicapped as poor cripples to making independence a possibility.

We now have primary aggressor laws on the books and stalker laws and laws specifically designed to protect women and children from abuse. It wasn't that long ago in our history that women and children were nothing more than property and if a man wanted to beat them, it was his business.

Thank goodness we do change and we do evolve! Is it possible that God is behind such change?

Our scripture reading for today is the conclusion of a story that is all about change – change that some found downright wrong and disturbing – while others were astounded.

Peter, the leader of the Christian movement was led by the Holy Spirit to go to the house of a Gentile named Cornelius where he ended up baptizing the whole family. I know it hardly seems shocking. But at that time it was shocking. Peter was challenged by change. He grew up thinking Gentiles were unclean. He grew up being taught not to associate with Gentiles. And then God told Peter to get up and go to the house of a Gentile... and somewhere along the way Peter comes to understand that God's reach is much bigger than his small minded thinking.

Peter's change of heart, and his shocking baptism of a Gentile family, shook the Christian movement. No doubt some wrote letters to Peter saying they weren't about to belong to a church that welcomed Gentiles and their dirty food and dirty hands. No doubt more than a few folks pulled Peter aside to tell him that he was wrong and they were going to find a church that believed what they believed. But Peter stood by his actions, because he knew that the Spirit of God was leading this change to welcome Gentiles.

It didn't happen overnight. There were details to work out. Peter and Paul had to go a few rounds about whether or not Gentiles had to follow all the Jewish laws to be Christians. Peter said yes. Paul said no. Peter changed his mind on that one too. In other words his thinking on this matter of Gentiles evolved.

If Peter were a political candidate some might call him a flip-flopper. But clearly God was leading the charge for this change. And Christianity, throughout history has evolved – and every step of the way there has been resistance...

Marten Van Buren thought traveling 15 miles an hour was break neck speed. Just yesterday I was listening to Doug Pierce talk about what it is like to bank and F-16 at over 9 G's. Now that is break neck speed! Whether we like it or not, change happens. We evolve. And so does our faith.

Today is Mother's Day and it is also the day we have chosen to honor our graduates. It is a day of traditions and a day to celebrate the future that our graduates will be creating. Change is happening so rapidly some of us feel left behind in its wake. Some of us want to dig in our heels and cling to the way things have always been, and others are riding the wave with great enthusiasm. And somewhere in the mix is our faith, and our struggle to understand what it means to be Christian in this age.

In an age of rapid change, what are we to hold on to, and what must we release?

Truth be told, I don't know. Do we hold on to the church the way we have always done it or is the the Holy Spirit going to surprise us with something different. Do we hold on to the music we have always sung or is the Holy Spirit singing new songs? Do we hold on to laws that divide us or do we make room for the Holy Spirit to bring us together? Do we protect our borders to preserve what we have or do we allow the Holy Spirit to erase the borders that separate us? Do we hang on to things so we can be comfortable or do we open ourselves to be disturbed by God's Spirit?

If this passage tells me anything – it tells me that God is full of surprises.

So what are we to hold on to as our culture moves at break neck speed?

How about the Golden Rule – love your neighbor as you love yourself.

How about Jesus' admonition to care for the least of these...

How about living our lives for others rather than serving only our own self-interests.

Are these not the values of our faith? Love – Compassion – Service – and Sacrifice This much has not changed.

Love – Compassion – Service – and Sacrifice – these are what define a Christian home.

Love – Compassion – Service - and Sacrifice are also the values we give to our children as we send them out into a world that is constantly evolving.

Love- Compassion – Service – and Sacrifice are the values worth digging in our heels to preserve.

As for the rest of it – I guess I'll just have to let the Holy Spirit surprise us.