

Sixth Sunday of Easter:
Series Title: “Counter-Cultural Community”

10 May 2015: Mammy’s Day

FUMC—Arlington, TX 76011

“For the World”—*Preaching Text: Acts 10:44-48*

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My mother had a great deal of trouble with me,
but I think she enjoyed it
(Mark Twain).

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Conventional wisdom says that opposites attract, but in the case of our two primary characters from Acts 10 we could say that the truth writes this reality in spades. In the real world, people as different as Cornelius and Peter simply do not come into meaningful relationships as depicted by Acts 10. Cornelius and Peter represent cultures too divided to interact. These interactions rarely occur in real life. Too modern ears this story sounds like a “fairly tale.” Hear the lesson for the day:

44 While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.
45 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, 46 for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 47 “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” 48 So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days (Acts 10:44-48).

Cornelius is about to get a new set of mentors or we could even call them “relatives in the faith.” When we become Christians we join a new family—the household of faith. We call each other brother and sister and call others “Father.” In a bit we will speak of a mother who isn’t a biological mother. Our lesson today has to do with “going into the world.” The church goes into the world when it opens the church to Gentiles. That topic is the concern of Acts 10—the story of Peter and Cornelius.

Here is our story’s framework. Peter is in Joppa and Cornelius (Roman Army officer and Gentile) is in

Caesarea Philippi. Each sees a vision. Cornelius' vision tells him to send for Peter. Peter's vision entails "heaven opened and something like a large sheet . . . being lowered." On the sheet are "all kinds" of animals. A voice commands: "Get up, Peter, kill and eat," that is to say, eat food banned by Jewish law. At Cornelius' house, Peter tells those assembled (Jews/Gentiles): "You . . . 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 . . . [ritually] unclean." Peter in this story has summed up the good news, telling them that "God shows no partiality." The Holy Spirit comes on "all who hear the word" and Peter baptizes many Gentiles. The Jewish believers are astonished "that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles." Peter and his followers stay with Cornelius' family and eat with them. Table fellowship signals full acceptance—and the church will never be the same.

When something this momentous happens there is an air of mystery, perhaps even secrecy about it. It is almost as if it is too good to be true and no one would believe us. Verse 8 in

Mark shows this notion. A robed man says to the woman:

' . . . tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid (Mark 16:7-8).

Interestingly enough, functioning here is what some scholars call Mark's "Messianic Secret." Repeatedly Jesus requests that people to not mention his act of one miracle or another. The women at the tomb however do—not as the "man in a white robe" tells them. Rather they keep quiet as Jesus insists through Mark. Yet they got it backward.

Sometimes we keep secrets for our own advantage, but other times the sharing of information is too important to keep to ourselves. No doubt at the tomb there is confusion. I once saw a Mercedes Benz advertisement that shows their car colliding with a cement wall during a safety test. Someone asks the company spokesman why they do not enforce their patent on the

Mercedes Benz's energy-absorbing car body, a design evidently copied by other auto companies because of its success.

The company spokesman replies matter-of-factly, "Because some things in life are too important not to share." This is a truism that we can each ponder. In that category of "things too important not to share" also falls the gospel of salvation.

Those who tell us the truth are our advocates and mothers are among the finest. They tell us when we are going off the tracks. They encourage us when we are on the tracks. Have you ever heard the term "balcony people?" "Balcony people" identify people who watch our life from beyond this life. "Balcony people" sit above and cheer for us as we struggle. "Balcony people" have perhaps passed from earth, but they still hold our aspirations in their hearts. Our Apostles' Creed uses the phrase "the communion of saints" and it means something like this. My mother passed in 1995, weeks after her sixty-fifth birthday. I am sure that from the beyond she applauds my struggles each day. Each of us has "balcony people." They watch us and cheer us on.

Two great figures in the Christian faith had notable mothers. They served as "balcony people" for their respective sons. Saint Augustine was one of most prolific writers and theologians in church history. He framed faith doctrines in response to heresies in North Africa during his lifetime (Pelagianism and Donatism). Augustine's mother was Monica. Today many Catholic churches around the world bear her name. Another key figure was John Wesley's mother Susanna. She had nineteen children, although not all survived to adulthood. Susanna was pious, cultured, and strict. She brought up her children according to exact religious rules of everyday living. The Epworth parsonage in its rigorous discipline became the cradle of Methodism.

Mothers inspire our good living by example and these mothers come in all shapes, forms, and guises. Robert Fulghum, who wrote *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, wrote that he placed alongside the mirror in his bathroom a small picture of a woman who is not his wife—risky business! Every morning as he stands shaving, he looks at that picture. It shows

a small humped-over woman wearing sandals and a blue sari. She is surrounded by important looking people in tuxedos, evening gowns, and the regalia of royalty. The picture is of Mother Teresa receiving the Nobel Prize! Fulghum said he keeps that picture there to remind him that, more than a president of any nation, more than any pope, more than any chief executive officer of a major corporation, that woman has authority because she is a servant. That is the kind of teaching a mother as a “balcony person” would want to instill in her children.

** Last, our “balcony people” and our mothers teach us life lessons that are highly practical.

John Claypool related a story that helped shape him. He told the story:

When World War II started, my family did not have a washing machine. With gas rationed and the laundry several miles away, keeping our clothes clean became an intensely practical problem. One of my father’s business associates was drafted, and his wife prepared to go with him, and we offered to let them store their furniture in our basement. Quite unexpectedly, they suggested that we use their washing machine while they were gone. “It would be better for it to be running,” they said, “than sitting up rusting.” So this is what we did, and it helped us a great deal.

Since I used to help with the washing, across the years I developed quite an affectionate relationship to that old green Bendix. But eventually the war ended and our friends returned, and in the meantime I had forgotten how the machine had come to be in our basement in the first place. When they came and took it, I was terribly upset, and I said so quite openly.

But my mother, being the wise woman she is, sat me down and put things in perspective for me. She said, “Wait a minute, son. You must remember, that machine never belonged to us in the first place. That we ever got to use it at all was a gift. So, instead of being mad at its being taken away, let’s use this occasion to be grateful that we had it at all” (*A Chorus of Witnesses: Model Sermons for Today’s Preacher*, pp. 128-9)

I suppose the point of good parenting is to work yourself out of a job. The best mothers raise children that are mature and self-reliant—folks that become good citizens and contribute to everyone’s well-being. “Balcony people” are with us all the time. Perhaps some the most important “balcony people” are the mothers we have or had. They guided us and made us to be much better people than we would have been without them. Today our prayer is that our mothers might know that their work with us is never work done in vain. Amen.