

**Taken By Surprise**  
**Acts 10:44-48**  
**John 15:9-17**

Last year, Bill and Betty Reusser's family planned a party. Both Bill and Betty were turning 90 and a *big* party was planned – a surprise party! (Bernie & Marie were recently part of such guile as Papa Weibe turned 90!) The Fireplace Room at Swiss Village was decorated and family and friends were gathered. Under the guise of “just a little get-together,” Bill and Betty were lured from their apartment to the Fireplace Room. For those who weren't present, a wonderful photo book captured the initial moments of their surprise. To be sure, the first pictures depict expressions of exclaim and surprise – Betty with that great, broad smile, hands to her face; Bill looking more reserved but with a bright twinkle in his eye. It's just a collection of pictures, but through them one can almost *hear* the laughter and exclamations of surprise! However, as the pages are turned, the pictures quickly move from expressions of *surprise* to ones of *delight*.

For Betty and Bill - for the planners of the surprise party - true joy emerged and continued throughout the afternoon's celebration. The experience of the afternoon was not the weak-kneed aftermath of simply being startled by some sudden unexpected sight – like a mouse in the silverware drawer, or “discovering” someone else in the bathroom while entertaining house guests! (I'm sure we all have our share of *these* “embarrassing” surprise stories!) In contrast, the surprise of this day ripened into a rich treasury of fellowship and renewed kinship of family and friends.

Today's text from Acts (and from John 15) also offer stories of surprise – not stories of startling embarrassment, but stories which tell of transformed lives. They are stories which invite our transformation, as well.

- As we revisit the surprising encounter of Peter and Cornelius, may *our* hearts be open to be “taken by surprise.”
- As we listen, may we be awakened to the delight which God had in preparing such an experience for those earliest of followers. May we realize that God delights in preparing such surprises for us, as well!

For if you were to ask me to attempt to offer my *best* description of how *I* experience God's love, I would want to tell you stories of my greatest surprise. I would tell you of experiences and events which grasped me so boldly that suddenly - although strangely subtly-I began to see the world around me and within me in unexpected ways, in a surprising “new light,” with eyes seeing possibility instead of impossibility! I would tell you stories which have led me to say, “Who would have ever imagined!”

*Now, to the story which preceded our NT reading for this morning! In this story, unbeknownst to either the Jewish, Jesus-following Peter or Cornelius – that quintessential Gentile - God was up to something which would surprise the both of them!*

**REVISIT ACTS 10**

“One afternoon at about 3:00 p.m. Cornelius, a centurion in the Roman army, was praying. As he was praying, he had a startling vision. Acts 10 records that “he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him simply, ‘Cornelius.’” Cornelius stared at the angel... *in terror*... (Earlier, it was noted that Cornelius was a very devout man who feared God, who gave alms and prayed constantly... why was he so terrorized, so surprised? What *had* he been praying for?!) When he was able to speak, Cornelius said, “**What is it, Lord?**” The angel’s seemingly cryptic response – these words of instruction and action, “Send men to Joppa for a certain Simon called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, the tanner who lives by the sea.”

(The work of the tanner – preparing hides- places Simon on the “fringes” of acceptability in the Jewish community. He spent much of us time being ritually unclean as he handled dead animals. He was in a class much like those nasty shepherds to whom the angels brought the good news of Jesus’ birth. Why was Peter staying at his house, anyway!)

Well, it was about noon on the next day, that Peter who was staying with Simon the tanner, went up on the roof to pray. Peter became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. Peter saw the heavens opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then Peter heard a voice... *and he was greatly puzzled*. Peter was greatly puzzled because he recognized the voice as that of the Lord, yet this familiar voice was inviting him into a foreign place. Kosher Peter was invited to take *any* of these creatures and make a meal out of them! Peter’s initial response to such a surprising invitation... He nearly spits out the words, “**No Way!**” Yet, the Spirit continued to offer invitation to Peter.

It this wasn’t startling enough for Peter, while he was still puzzling over what to make of this strange vision, *suddenly* the men sent by Cornelius appeared. Remember what had happened the day before at Cornelius’ home! While Peter was still “digesting” his vision, the Spirit said to him, “Look, three men are searching for you...” No matter how puzzled Peter was, something within him was being transformed; for he responds to the men at the door stating, “I’m the one you are looking for...” and he welcomed them into his home.

Following a night’s rest -with these Roman, Gentile houseguests -Peter traveled with other (circumcised) believers from Joppa, a two day’s journey to Caesarea, to the home of Cornelius- Cornelius, the Roman, Gentile, soldier! When they arrived, Cornelius was

expecting them. He had already called together his relatives and friends! They were there waiting “to hear what Peter had to say.” Cornelius recounts his vision to Peter, “So now...we are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.” I picture Cornelius standing expectantly, the room so quiet that one could have heard a pin drop!

Gulp! Let’s wait a moment to let the impact of this sink in! This exchange of hospitality, this freedom to associate in one another’s’ homes and to sit together at table. This was happening between Jews and Gentiles! How could this be!

It would be an understatement to say that there was a division between Jews and Gentiles – there was hatred and contempt! According to William Barclay, some Jews suggested that Gentiles were “created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell!” If a Jew married a Gentile, the Jewish community would hold a funeral for the one who had broken the racial taboo.

What’s happening here?

- Read from Acts 10:34-43 (Jim, our own Peter!)
- (Anita to speak over his final words...) “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word...the circumcised believers were *astounded!*” Peter, who only two days before had exclaimed ... “by no means, Lord” when repulsed by the thought of eating unclean animals now, while standing in the home a Gentile says, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” *What a surprise!*
- Our surprises
  - our shared life together as Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship
  - last Sunday evening’s worship – Marie, “trust the Spirit; David- prepare to be surprised!”
  - the discovery of so many kingdom gifts among us – in “unlikely” vessels!
    - Each one of us! Who would have ever believed it!
- Some thoughts for us to consider:
  - As we seek the Spirit’s leading, how often do we stop to consider the impact of our individual responses? Think again of Cornelius and Peter. Each one has a particular encounter with the divine, yet neither is complete without the other. If either one of the two had not heeded his call, this surprising, life-giving message would have lay lifeless. Yes, angels and visions were part of this encounter, BUT so was human response and choice. Peter’s Jewish Jesus movement was not and could not be complete without the welcome of

Cornelius and his insights into the ways of God. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit empowered each of them to see beyond the labels of Jew and Gentile.

- We often hear the expression of “seeking God’s call on our life” as if it were only something for us personally. Aren’t we discovering our in budding fellowship that God’s call is much, much more than a “personal” call? As each of us welcomes and invites the Spirit’s word, we discover a wonderfully choreographed dialogue of the Good News being released in and through us – for ERMF, First Mennonite, for Berne, for “Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and for the “ends of the earth!” (Acts 1)
  
- Consider what is astir within you. The leading of the Spirit may come as a great gift personally, but it is never given only for ones own benefit and satisfaction. Be assured, even if we are terrified or puzzled by what the Spirit seems to be prompting, somewhere- unbeknownst to us – the same Spirit quickens another’s heart. TOGETHER our welcoming responses – to the Spirit- open way for the kingdom’s coming!
  
- Let’s live welcoming the surprising ways of God. And yes, God waits, as a loved one preparing a surprise party. God waits with expectation for our expressions of delight and joy as we discover the kingdom among us!

*May each of us be “taken by surprise” this week!*

Notes for communion:

- May 08 our Emmaus Road name “called”
  
- God’s surprising ways- always astir within and around, bringing delight, offering new life. Why does the Spirit seem to be at work like this?
  - Because of God’s incredible love for each of us and all of us together.
  
  - So that joy may be complete – for joy is only truly joy when it is shared and celebrated with one another – the best part of sharing surprises!
  
  - Isn’t this a description of worship- a gathering to celebrate God’s surprising ways – in our individual lives *and* in the ways that the Holy Spirit knits our live together? We celebrate today by sharing in this great feast!