

## WHERE WILL YOU FIND JESUS?

A Sermon by Rev. Cal Chinn  
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Acts 10:44-48

AFTER YEARS OF SEEING HUNDREDS OF CHURCHES LEAVE THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA), THE STATISTICAL REPORT COMING OUT OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY THIS YEAR INDICATES THAT THE NUMBER OF DEPARTING CHURCHES HAS DECREASED. While the difference is not great, we are encouraged by the downward trend of membership loss slowing down. We are losing members still; but at least we can take comfort that the downward trend is slowing down. And for the first time ever, the Southern Baptist Convention membership has declined more rapidly than the Presbyterian Church (USA). The number of Americans who claim “no religion”—sometimes referred to as **“nones”** because of how they answer the question, *“what is your religious tradition”*—now are as big as evangelicals and Catholics. So what do we make of this? We’ve got work to do! I’m not concerned about success in numbers; I’m concerned about the transforming love of Jesus reaching the world. Yes, I’m concerned about evangelism, about the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ to the world.

When I was ordained in 1966, our beloved Presbyterian Church was thriving—our sanctuaries were full, all of my seminary classmates received a call. Our evangelism program for church growth worked; we had a winning formula. What I didn’t realize at the time was that the church was already in the process of quenching the Spirit, or if it wasn’t, it soon would be. The Spirit is always most visible to us when we’re beaten, broken and in despair; the Spirit is less visible and less important when we’re winning, prosperous, and in charge of the world. The Spirit works well for movements, but fares poorly in institutions.

Like an out-of-control wildfire, the Holy Spirit leapt from the Jews to the Gentiles, amazing Peter and his fellow Christians from Jerusalem, referred to as the *“circumcised”* in today’s scripture reading. The Spirit was wild,

unpredictable, totally beyond human restraint. In the early church, the Spirit became the only explanation for the way the embers of the Jesus movement were miraculously fanned into a worldwide inferno. And in the text from Acts, the Spirit is cited as the reason that movement easily surmounted racial barriers to ignite the incredible burst of enthusiasm among the non-Jews.

My oldest grandchild has begun visiting college campuses to decide which schools she will apply to in her senior year of high school, next year. Of course, I don't need to remind you of this year's infamous "Varsity Blues" admissions scandal, something I don't worry about my son and daughter-in-law engaging in. Families who send their school age children to SF public schools face a challenging admissions process to get their children into their schools of choice. Some of us have been turned down for jobs that we felt eminently qualified for. I didn't know it at the time, but being rejected by all the medical schools I applied to turned out to be a blessing. Well, the church has an Admissions Officer, too, you know. And the Admissions Officer of the church is Jesus. Jesus said to his disciples, **"you did not choose me, but I chose you"**! The problem is that many of us in the church act as if we are the admissions committee of the church. And we somehow think that we can reject and exclude and not welcome people whom Jesus chooses. Some of us think that infants and young children who make noise should not be allowed at worship. A lot of churches send out the message that if you are poor or mentally-challenged, you are not welcomed. Some still think that homosexuals are immoral and therefore cannot be ordained as church officers. Some of us think of ourselves as theologically advanced and so we look down on folks who are a bit too conservative and fundamental. And all of us, look down on folks we are not comfortable being around. Again, it is Jesus who chooses for the church.

Two Sundays from now is Pentecost where the huge crowds of people, gathered around the disciples of Jesus, were ASTOUNDED to hear these Jewish followers of Jesus speaking in many languages. Today's reading describes another Pentecost that took place; it was Pentecost for the Gentiles. According to today's reading, *"...the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out EVEN on the Gentiles, for they were speaking in tongues and extolling God."* And the disciples together with Peter, WERE ASTOUNDED! You see, that's what the Holy Spirit does. It ASTOUNDS us. According to Acts, the circumcised believers (meaning the Jews), were ASTOUNDED that the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out EVEN on the Gentiles—foreigners, others, outsiders. At the recent Pastors' Seminar that Victor and I attended, our leader Rodger Nishioka reminded us: *"When we encounter those who are the same as us, we experience CONFIRMATION. But when we encounter the "other", it leads to transformation, to our conversion."* I experienced a crisis of faith, which almost stopped me from going to seminary. I was working in Silicon Valley, for a semiconductor company where I met Phil. Phil was the most loving and caring, patient and compassionate person I had ever met. One day, Phil mentioned in passing that he did not go to any church; and much less claim to be a Christian. He was what we would call today a "none." I thought to myself, *"How could that be? How could Phil NOT be a Christian. What was the point of my being a minister, serving the church, if there were people like Phil who didn't need the church, much less Jesus?"* I was astounded!

We think of evangelism as *"come join us."* Come attend our regular new member gatherings. In Acts, the Lord is telling us to GO where God is already at work. Evangelism is following...and to follow does not mean asking others to join us...but asking others to follow Jesus as we have been asked to follow. Evangelism is following Jesus wherever he leads us. And quite frankly, he has already done the engineering studies, surveyed the terrain, built the road and highway...and is there waiting for us. So according to Acts, evangelism is NOT asking people to join us, but to accept Jesus' invitation to follow, to go where he has gone. And where do you think we will find Jesus? According to Acts, Jesus will take us to the Gentiles. The Gentiles were all the non-Jewish folk. If you are white, think brown, black, yellow, red. If you are upper middle class, think lower class. If you are free, think of those who in many ways are imprisoned. If you are healthy, think of those sick and dying. If you are well-fed, think of the poor and the homeless. Church growth movements which preach evangelism by reaching those who are like-minded, like-colored, like political and theological orientation, like social economic position are NOT biblical.

Will Campbell tells a wonderful story which I will adapt for our purpose: *Let's just suppose now for a few seconds that there is a very effective, popular, well-known, well-publicized evangelist preaching to a packed crowd at Oracle Arena. The time*

comes for the invitation and the choir is singing, "Just as I am, without one plea, but that thou biddest me come to thee, O Lamb of God, I Come, I Come"! All of a sudden Michael Conley stops and changes a word they sing to... "O Lamb of God, **I GO!**"! And the preacher is extending the invitation: "Yes, I see all of you, even those of you up in the nosebleed section of seats, 'WON'T YOU COME'? But all of a sudden, he changes his spiel and says, "NO, DON'T COME UP HERE TO THE STAGE; GET BACK, THERE'S NOTHING UP HERE"! The choir is still singing, "O Lamb of God, **I GO!!**"! And as one, we hear a 1000 engines start up in the night in the parking lot of the Arena. Several hours later, Gavin Newsom's phone begins to ring. It is the Warden at San Quentin saying, "There are 1000's of people out here, trying to get in." And the Governor says, "Well, what do they want?" And the Warden says, "They say they're looking for Jesus." "Well, tell them to go to church. We don't have Jesus in there." **They say they went to church...and they didn't find him. They were told that they could find Jesus in the prisons and in the nursing homes and in the hospitals and in the tenderloin, and now they're outside the prison, and they say they want to SEE their Jesus."**

When Calvary follows Jesus into the city—to Boys and Girls Club, to New Door Ventures, to Raphael House, to SF Achievers, to Martin De Porres, the Food Pantry, to SafeHouse, to the Border, to standing with and assisting refugees, to filling Food Bank barrels, *there we will find Jesus.*

Peter and his companions were astounded with the Holy Spirit falling upon the Gentiles. But what amazed and astounded **me** about this account was that Peter was converted by this incident. You see, Peter could have questioned it, denied it, rejected it...because it did not fit his own understanding and belief about the Holy Spirit. Instead, he conformed his practice to his newly informed perspective; and he instructed the Gentiles to be baptized, signaling a shift from exclusiveness to inclusiveness. When we encounter the other, we will experience conversion and be transformed. And like Peter, we will *really* mean it when we say, "*We welcome everyone!*"

My children are the product of a mixed marriage. They have been called awful names and have been looked down upon in certain situations. Many years ago, I was invited to speak at a predominantly Chinese congregation in Washington, DC. There I met an inter-racial couple, Chinese and Caucasian, who had a daughter in the 6th grade. Being members of this predominantly Chinese congregation, Melinda, the daughter, was a member of the church's Chinese Dance Troupe. Her parents shared with me an incident where a family friend was visiting and Melinda was showing the friend a picture of the Dance Troupe. Melinda pointed to the picture and said, "*That's me, the one who is not quite Chinese.*" The friend wisely said to Melinda: "*Oh Melinda, the better way to put it is to not think of yourself as NOT QUITE Chinese; think of yourself as **MORE THAN** Chinese.*" That's the way to think of the church of Jesus Christ. The church is always **MORE THAN** what we will want it to be.

