

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Stumbling: Holy Audibles”

Dr. Jay Howell

Acts 10:34-48

September 18, 2022

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The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

“I knew we were about to see something extraordinary.” That’s what Simon Cowell said one night about thirteen years ago. Simon Cowell is a British TV personality who was one of the first judges on the shows *American Idol* and a British equivalent *Britain’s Got Talent*. His whole schtick had been to be kind of a jerk.

But on occasion, even he could be surprised.

That night, thirteen years ago, an act came out on stage, and immediately Simon, along with everyone else dismissed her. If you’ve seen those shows, you know they plant a few clunkers in the early rounds, someone who is just delusional about their voice, when in reality they’re really bad, so, for the ratings I guess. What does it say about us, by the way, that we’ll tune-in in droves to watch people make fools of themselves?

So someone came out on stage that Simon and everyone else thought was going to be one of those joke acts. Her name was Susan Boyle. Some of you may remember this. Susan Boyle comes out with kind of frizzy, messy hair, and more generally, imagine in your mind the profile of someone, whether that’s age, appearance, clothing, whatever, whom you would think most likely to be going out for fame and stardom on a show like *American Idol* or *Britain’s Got Talent*. Imagine what that person would look like in your mind. I’d wager the person you’re imagining is not someone like Susan Boyle.

She comes out on stage and answers a few questions. Right out of the gates, no one was taking her seriously. She had a really thick accent too, so folks were kind of figuring that the producers had teed up another joke act for entertainment value.

Then the music starts. It was the opening bars of the song “I Dreamed a Dream” from the musical *Les Miserables*. If you don’t know that song, it’s this emotional ballad, a solo, about how the character’s life had gone from bad to worse, really heartbreaking actually, and if you have this particular role in the musical, “I Dreamed a Dream” is your time to shine. A showstopper, sort of thing.

So then, folks in the audience start snickering, because not only does this lady not look the part at all, but she has the presumption to come out on stage and sing something like “I Dreamed a Dream.” So as the opening bars start playing, everyone there thought the same thing: “This is a joke.”

And then, she started singing.

A voice of power and grace cut off everyone’s snickering and stunned them into silence. Right after she hit those first notes, the camera goes over to the judges and in unison their faces go from thinly veiled cynicism to drop-jawed wonder.

She closes the number; the crowd rises to its feet; and once the applause had subsided, Simon Cowell from the judges' bench says, "I knew we were about to hear something extraordinary, and I was right," to the collective eye roll and groan of everyone else there.

Because the reaction, the catharsis even, came from the same place. They were all thinking the same thing: what they heard was not supposed to come from someone like that.

I wonder if the look that came across the face of those judges, that sudden move into drop-jawed wonder, was the kind of look that came across Peter's face, there in Cornelius's house, surrounded by all of Cornelius's household and friends and relatives. Because he had to have been thinking the same thing too: what he heard was not supposed to come from people like that.

If you've been with us the past two weeks, you'll remember how Peter got there, but to offer a quick recap, Peter was traveling around visiting believers in the early church, and one day on the rooftop of a house he was staying at, he had a vision of all these animals coming down from heaven on a giant sheet. But then a voice said, "Get up; kill and eat." And he protests, because eating some of the animals he saw would've been against Jewish law and tradition. Then a voice said, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." And that's it. So Peter's just confused at that point.

But just then some men sent by a man named Cornelius arrive and ask Peter to come with them. You see, Cornelius, in another town 40 miles away, had received another vision to send for Peter. Cornelius was a faithful man, but not a Christian per se, rather a Gentile convert to Judaism, which didn't happen very often: why? Because at the time, Jews by law typically did not associate with Gentiles.

But Peter, led by the Spirit, goes with them, meets Cornelius, along with the crowd of friends and relatives Cornelius had invited to his house, and then starts to realize why he was there. His vision wasn't about food; it was about the people gathered there, this group of Gentiles, people he really wasn't supposed to be around, yet there they were.

It says something pretty powerful that there were all these people there. Remember, Cornelius and, presumably, everyone else in his household and all the friends and relatives he invited were not Christians. Cornelius was a God-fearing man but wouldn't have proclaimed, "Jesus is Lord!" He wouldn't have even known what that meant.

Still, Cornelius had invited these people he was close to to hear from this man Peter, who himself he did not know. Cornelius wasn't a part of a church. He didn't know what Peter would say. He just followed the instructions from a vision and then invited his friends and relatives to hear it too. That's how important it was to him.

That alone is staggering, because in comparison, here we are, joined as a church, joined in the name of Christ, which in theory we hold and proclaim as being of highest importance, life and death, the very purpose of existence, and yet I wonder, how many times have we invited friends and family to be a part of it?

But it doesn't seem like he had to cajole all these folks into coming. Even though they weren't Christian, they came, based on the invitation of their friend, of someone they trusted, but I suspect also because of something deeper, a yearning, a restlessness that nothing in this world could satisfy for them.

There's a well-worn trail of columns and blog posts bemoaning the decline in church attendance the past thirty years in the United States. A lot of that commentary seems to focus on younger generations: something like "the Millennials and Gen Z are leaving the church in droves," or something like that. And it's partially true. Verified over and over by various Barna studies, Church involvement and connection have declined among younger generations. The part that often gets left out though is that the rate of decline in church connection is pretty similar no matter the age group. The Millennials aren't going to church as much, and neither are the Boomers. In fact, 36% fewer adults were regularly connected in a church today than almost thirty years earlier.

And that could and should be somewhat alarming, because across the board, it seems, folks are saying, "Church? Yeah maybe not." When polled for reasons why, you get answers that probably aren't surprising. The church is messy, and not messy in the good ways we've talked about the past two weeks. Messy in bad ways. The church is seen as just one scandal or abuse after another, as discredited. Or the church is seen not as a witness to Jesus but as some activist wing for partisan hackery. But the biggest reason? It's the thought that you don't need church to connect to God. I'll do it on my own. The church has too much baggage anyway.

But before we dive too much into the doom and gloom, there were some glimmers of hope in the statistics out of these Barna studies. Connection in churches declined, but you know what held steady over that same time period? Regular prayer, and regular reading of the Bible. Those two things are kind of baffling, because you would think if folks were less and less connected in church, then you'd see less and less of practices like prayer and Scripture, but that didn't happen. What does that tell us?

Well, among the things it could tell us, I believe, is that the same yearning, the same restlessness that nothing in this world could satisfy that brought that crowd together in Cornelius's house is very much still at work today.

Put simply, though the church may require a bit of course correction, our innate longing for God hasn't gone anywhere. The question is, what's the church going to do about it?

Well, if Peter is any guide in this, one place to start is to talk about Jesus. Did you notice that about his address to this crowd? Peter had never spoken to a group like this in his life. A house full of Gentiles, people with little to no awareness of Jewish Scripture (Cornelius presumably had some). So does Peter come up with some slick new angle? He proclaims that God shows no partiality, there in v. 34, but then what does he say after that? He just talks about Jesus, about his ministry, about his death, about his resurrection, wrapping up in the good news there in v. 43: “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Sometimes the church, perhaps driven by a bit of anxiety at those stats I cited earlier, can stumble over itself trying to be “relevant,” or “contemporary,” or whatever adjective you want to use. The gospel indeed must be translated and reinterpreted in every place and every age, but at the end of the day, we’re just talking about Jesus.

But ultimately, and I never noticed this about this passage until this week, it wasn’t Peter’s charisma or preaching that really did anything. V. 44 says, “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.” “While Peter was still speaking.” Peter wasn’t done with his sermon. The Spirit of God interrupted him. Can you believe that? I mean the nerve. Interrupting a sermon, for Christ’s sake.

The people there in the room start speaking in tongues—and if any of you have questions about what that means, let’s talk more, but it was seen then as a common sign of the Spirit’s work as one comes to faith. Here’s what was amazing, though: for Peter, that sort of thing was only supposed to happen among Jewish converts, because that was the church, Jewish converts to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, the risen Lord. The notion that sounds like that could come from people like those there in that room, Gentiles, didn’t compute. For Peter, this was his Susan Boyle moment, mouth drop-jawed in awe and astonishment.

And Peter realizes that this whole thing, his vision, his journey, this whole messy ordeal of him stumbling into this situation, wasn’t about what he would say or how he would minister to this group, or even about how inclusive he was being associating with Gentiles. It’s as if the Holy Spirit was saying, “You know, good on you Peter for spending time with these folks, but this isn’t about how nice and accommodating you are. I’m showing you something.”

And that something would come to change the church forever, for it showed that the good news of this Jesus, and fellowship into which the Spirit drew Christ’s believers, wasn’t going to be just a Jewish thing, but an everybody thing. And it that didn’t come about because Peter was so slick a communicator. The Spirit interrupted him, after all. I mean, talk about messy.

Peter, the one to whom Christ himself had said, “Upon this rock I shall build my church,” Peter, the one who himself gave the very first sermon on Pentecost, Peter one of the leaders in the early church, was offering some words, another fine sermon, and no doubt he had a great ending planned, something stirring with a point of application or inspiration, and the Spirit cuts him off.

And he had the faith to see that sometimes the best thing you can do is stop preaching and see what the Spirit is doing. At some point, you can’t argue with your own ears. Susan Boyle has a fantastic voice. So Peter says, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And they’re all baptized.

Friends, the work of the church is still and always will be messy, but perhaps we’ve gotten a bit too consumed with finishing our sermons, so to speak, with completing what we had planned out, with going about things the way we’re used to doing them, and not open enough to see how the Spirit of God in his messy, astonishing, unexpected ways might be at work in the hearts of those who aren’t too high on this church thing. Maybe we haven’t been open enough for the Spirit to interrupt us. Sometimes the best thing you can do is stop preaching and see what the Spirit is doing. Sometimes the best thing you can do is stop preaching.

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I wonder if the look that came across the face of those judges, that sudden move into drop-jawed wonder, was the kind of look that came across Peter's face, there in Cornelius's house, surrounded by all of Cornelius's household and friends and relatives. Because he had to have been thinking the same thing too: what he heard was not supposed to come from people like that.

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It says something pretty powerful that there were all these people there. Remember, Cornelius and, presumably, everyone else in his household and all the friends and relatives he invited were not Christians. Cornelius was a God-fearing man but wouldn't have proclaimed, "Jesus is Lord!" He wouldn't have even known what that meant.

Still, Cornelius had invited these people he was close to to hear from this man Peter, who himself he did not know. Cornelius wasn't a part of a church. He didn't know what Peter would say. He just followed the instructions from a vision and then invited his friends and relatives to hear it too. That's how important it was to him.

That alone is staggering, because in comparison, here we are, joined as a church, joined in the name of Christ, which in theory we hold and proclaim as being of highest importance, life and death, the very purpose of existence, and yet I wonder, how many times have we invited friends and family to be a part of it?

But it doesn't seem like he had to cajole all these folks into coming. Even though they weren't Christian, they came, based on the invitation of their friend, of someone they trusted, but I suspect also because of something deeper, a yearning, a restlessness that nothing in this world could satisfy for them.

There's a well-worn trail of columns and blog posts bemoaning the decline in church attendance the past thirty years in the United States. A lot of that commentary seems to focus on younger generations: something like "the Millennials and Gen Z are leaving the church in droves," or something like that. And it's partially true. Verified over and over by various Barna studies, Church involvement and connection have declined among younger generations. The part that often gets left out though is that the rate of decline in church connection is pretty similar no matter the age group. The Millennials aren't going to church as much, and neither are the Boomers. In fact, 36% fewer adults were regularly connected in a church today than almost thirty years earlier.

And that could and should be somewhat alarming, because across the board, it seems, folks are saying, "Church? Yeah maybe not." When polled for reasons why, you get answers that probably aren't surprising. The church is messy, and not messy in the good ways we've talked about the past two weeks. Messy in bad ways. The church is seen as just one scandal or abuse after another, as discredited. Or the church is seen not as a witness to Jesus but as some activist wing for partisan hackery. But the biggest reason? It's the thought that you don't need church to connect to God. I'll do it on my own. The church has too much baggage anyway.

But before we dive too much into the doom and gloom, there were some glimmers of hope in the statistics out of these Barna studies. Connection in churches declined, but you know what held steady over that same time period? Regular prayer, and regular reading of the Bible. Those two things are kind of baffling, because you would think if folks were less and less connected in church, then you'd see less and less of practices like prayer and Scripture, but that didn't happen. What does that tell us?

Well, among the things it could tell us, I believe, is that the same yearning, the same restlessness that nothing in this world could satisfy that brought that crowd together in Cornelius's house is very much still at work today.

Put simply, though the church may require a bit of course correction, our innate longing for God hasn't gone anywhere. The question is, what's the church going to do about it?

Well, if Peter is any guide in this, one place to start is to talk about Jesus. Did you notice that about his address to this crowd? Peter had never spoken to a group like this in his life. A house full of Gentiles, people with little to no awareness of Jewish Scripture (Cornelius presumably had some). So does Peter come up with some slick new angle? He proclaims that God shows no partiality, there in v. 34, but then what does he say after that? He just talks about Jesus, about his ministry, about his death, about his resurrection, wrapping up in the good news there in v. 43: “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Sometimes the church, perhaps driven by a bit of anxiety at those stats I cited earlier, can stumble over itself trying to be “relevant,” or “contemporary,” or whatever adjective you want to use. The gospel indeed must be translated and reinterpreted in every place and every age, but at the end of the day, we’re just talking about Jesus.

But ultimately, and I never noticed this about this passage until this week, it wasn’t Peter’s charisma or preaching that really did anything. V. 44 says, “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.” “While Peter was still speaking.” Peter wasn’t done with his sermon. The Spirit of God interrupted him. Can you believe that? I mean the nerve. Interrupting a sermon, for Christ’s sake.

The people there in the room start speaking in tongues—and if any of you have questions about what that means, let’s talk more, but it was seen then as a common sign of the Spirit’s work as one comes to faith. Here’s what was amazing, though: for Peter, that sort of thing was only supposed to happen among Jewish converts, because that was the church, Jewish converts to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, the risen Lord. The notion that sounds like that could come from people like those there in that room, Gentiles, didn’t compute. For Peter, this was his Susan Boyle moment, mouth drop-jawed in awe and astonishment.

And Peter realizes that this whole thing, his vision, his journey, this whole messy ordeal of him stumbling into this situation, wasn’t about what he would say or how he would minister to this group, or even about how inclusive he was being associating with Gentiles. It’s as if the Holy Spirit was saying, “You know, good on you Peter for spending time with these folks, but this isn’t about how nice and accommodating you are. I’m showing you something.”

And that something would come to change the church forever, for it showed that the good news of this Jesus, and fellowship into which the Spirit drew Christ’s believers, wasn’t going to be just a Jewish thing, but an everybody thing. And it that didn’t come about because Peter was so slick a communicator. The Spirit interrupted him, after all. I mean, talk about messy.

Peter, the one to whom Christ himself had said, “Upon this rock I shall build my church,” Peter, the one who himself gave the very first sermon on Pentecost, Peter one of the leaders in the early church, was offering some words, another fine sermon, and no doubt he had a great ending planned, something stirring with a point of application or inspiration, and the Spirit cuts him off.

And he had the faith to see that sometimes the best thing you can do is stop preaching and see what the Spirit is doing. At some point, you can’t argue with your own ears. Susan Boyle has a fantastic voice. So Peter says, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And they’re all baptized.

Friends, the work of the church is still and always will be messy, but perhaps we’ve gotten a bit too consumed with finishing our sermons, so to speak, with completing what we had planned out, with going about things the way we’re used to doing them, and not open enough to see how the Spirit of God in his messy, astonishing, unexpected ways might be at work in the hearts of those who aren’t too high on this church thing. Maybe we haven’t been open enough for the Spirit to interrupt us. Sometimes the best thing you can do is stop preaching and see what the Spirit is doing. Sometimes the best thing you can do is stop preaching.

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³⁴ Then Peter began to speak to them: ‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. ³⁷ That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.’

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And that could and should be somewhat alarming, because across the board, it seems, folks are saying, "Church? Yeah maybe not." When polled for reasons why, you get answers that probably aren't surprising. The church is messy, and not messy in the good ways we've talked about the past two weeks. Messy in bad ways. The church is seen as just one scandal or abuse after another, as discredited. Or the church is seen not as a witness to Jesus but as some activist wing for partisan hackery. But the biggest reason? It's the thought that you don't need church to connect to God. I'll do it on my own. The church has too much baggage anyway.

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Well, if Peter is any guide in this, one place to start is to talk about Jesus. Did you notice that about his address to this crowd? Peter had never spoken to a group like this in his life. A house full of Gentiles, people with little to no awareness of Jewish Scripture (Cornelius presumably had some). So does Peter come up with some slick new angle? He proclaims that God shows no partiality, there in v. 34, but then what does he say after that? He just talks about Jesus, about his ministry, about his death, about his resurrection, wrapping up in the good news there in v. 43: “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

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The people there in the room start speaking in tongues—and if any of you have questions about what that means, let’s talk more, but it was seen then as a common sign of the Spirit’s work as one comes to faith. Here’s what was amazing, though: for Peter, that sort of thing was only supposed to happen among Jewish converts, because that was the church, Jewish converts to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, the risen Lord. The notion that sounds like that could come from people like those there in that room, Gentiles, didn’t compute. For Peter, this was his Susan Boyle moment, mouth drop-jawed in awe and astonishment.

And Peter realizes that this whole thing, his vision, his journey, this whole messy ordeal of him stumbling into this situation, wasn’t about what he would say or how he would minister to this group, or even about how inclusive he was being associating with Gentiles. It’s as if the Holy Spirit was saying, “You know, good on you Peter for spending time with these folks, but this isn’t about how nice and accommodating you are. I’m showing you something.”

And that something would come to change the church forever, for it showed that the good news of this Jesus, and fellowship into which the Spirit drew Christ’s believers, wasn’t going to be just a Jewish thing, but an everybody thing. And it that didn’t come about because Peter was so slick a communicator. The Spirit interrupted him, after all. I mean, talk about messy.

Peter, the one to whom Christ himself had said, “Upon this rock I shall build my church,” Peter, the one who himself gave the very first sermon on Pentecost, Peter one of the leaders in the early church, was offering some words, another fine sermon, and no doubt he had a great ending planned, something stirring with a point of application or inspiration, and the Spirit cuts him off.

And he had the faith to see that sometimes the best thing you can do is stop preaching and see what the Spirit is doing. At some point, you can’t argue with your own ears. Susan Boyle has a fantastic voice. So Peter says, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And they’re all baptized.

Friends, the work of the church is still and always will be messy, but perhaps we’ve gotten a bit too consumed with finishing our sermons, so to speak, with completing what we had planned out, with going about things the way we’re used to doing them, and not open enough to see how the Spirit of God in his messy, astonishing, unexpected ways might be at work in the hearts of those who aren’t too high on this church thing. Maybe we haven’t been open enough for the Spirit to interrupt us. Sometimes the best thing you can do is stop preaching and see what the Spirit is doing. Sometimes the best thing you can do is stop preaching.

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That night, thirteen years ago, an act came out on stage, and immediately Simon, along with everyone else dismissed her. If you’ve seen those shows, you know they plant a few clunkers in the early rounds, someone who is just delusional about their voice, when in reality they’re really bad, so, for the ratings I guess. What does it say about us, by the way, that we’ll tune-in in droves to watch people make fools of themselves?

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Then the music starts. It was the opening bars of the song “I Dreamed a Dream” from the musical *Les Miserables*. If you don’t know that song, it’s this emotional ballad, a solo, about how the character’s life had gone from bad to worse, really heartbreaking actually, and if you have this particular role in the musical, “I Dreamed a Dream” is your time to shine. A showstopper, sort of thing.

So then, folks in the audience start snickering, because not only does this lady not look the part at all, but she has the presumption to come out on stage and sing something like “I Dreamed a Dream.” So as the opening bars start playing, everyone there thought the same thing: “This is a joke.”

And then, she started singing.

A voice of power and grace cut off everyone’s snickering and stunned them into silence. Right after she hit those first notes, the camera goes over to the judges and in unison their faces go from thinly veiled cynicism to drop-jawed wonder.

She closes the number; the crowd rises to its feet; and once the applause had subsided, Simon Cowell from the judges' bench says, "I knew we were about to hear something extraordinary, and I was right," to the collective eye roll and groan of everyone else there.

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I wonder if the look that came across the face of those judges, that sudden move into drop-jawed wonder, was the kind of look that came across Peter's face, there in Cornelius's house, surrounded by all of Cornelius's household and friends and relatives. Because he had to have been thinking the same thing too: what he heard was not supposed to come from people like that.

If you've been with us the past two weeks, you'll remember how Peter got there, but to offer a quick recap, Peter was traveling around visiting believers in the early church, and one day on the rooftop of a house he was staying at, he had a vision of all these animals coming down from heaven on a giant sheet. But then a voice said, "Get up; kill and eat." And he protests, because eating some of the animals he saw would've been against Jewish law and tradition. Then a voice said, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." And that's it. So Peter's just confused at that point.

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The people there in the room start speaking in tongues—and if any of you have questions about what that means, let’s talk more, but it was seen then as a common sign of the Spirit’s work as one comes to faith. Here’s what was amazing, though: for Peter, that sort of thing was only supposed to happen among Jewish converts, because that was the church, Jewish converts to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, the risen Lord. The notion that sounds like that could come from people like those there in that room, Gentiles, didn’t compute. For Peter, this was his Susan Boyle moment, mouth drop-jawed in awe and astonishment.

And Peter realizes that this whole thing, his vision, his journey, this whole messy ordeal of him stumbling into this situation, wasn’t about what he would say or how he would minister to this group, or even about how inclusive he was being associating with Gentiles. It’s as if the Holy Spirit was saying, “You know, good on you Peter for spending time with these folks, but this isn’t about how nice and accommodating you are. I’m showing you something.”

And that something would come to change the church forever, for it showed that the good news of this Jesus, and fellowship into which the Spirit drew Christ’s believers, wasn’t going to be just a Jewish thing, but an everybody thing. And it that didn’t come about because Peter was so slick a communicator. The Spirit interrupted him, after all. I mean, talk about messy.

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SEQUOYAH HILLS
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Dr. Jay Howell

Acts 10:34-48

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The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

“I knew we were about to see something extraordinary.” That’s what Simon Cowell said one night about thirteen years ago. Simon Cowell is a British TV personality who was one of the first judges on the shows *American Idol* and a British equivalent *Britain’s Got Talent*. His whole schtick had been to be kind of a jerk.

But on occasion, even he could be surprised.

That night, thirteen years ago, an act came out on stage, and immediately Simon, along with everyone else dismissed her. If you’ve seen those shows, you know they plant a few clunkers in the early rounds, someone who is just delusional about their voice, when in reality they’re really bad, so, for the ratings I guess. What does it say about us, by the way, that we’ll tune-in in droves to watch people make fools of themselves?

So someone came out on stage that Simon and everyone else thought was going to be one of those joke acts. Her name was Susan Boyle. Some of you may remember this. Susan Boyle comes out with kind of frizzy, messy hair, and more generally, imagine in your mind the profile of someone, whether that’s age, appearance, clothing, whatever, whom you would think most likely to be going out for fame and stardom on a show like *American Idol* or *Britain’s Got Talent*. Imagine what that person would look like in your mind. I’d wager the person you’re imagining is not someone like Susan Boyle.

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Then the music starts. It was the opening bars of the song “I Dreamed a Dream” from the musical *Les Miserables*. If you don’t know that song, it’s this emotional ballad, a solo, about how the character’s life had gone from bad to worse, really heartbreaking actually, and if you have this particular role in the musical, “I Dreamed a Dream” is your time to shine. A showstopper, sort of thing.

So then, folks in the audience start snickering, because not only does this lady not look the part at all, but she has the presumption to come out on stage and sing something like “I Dreamed a Dream.” So as the opening bars start playing, everyone there thought the same thing: “This is a joke.”

And then, she started singing.

A voice of power and grace cut off everyone’s snickering and stunned them into silence. Right after she hit those first notes, the camera goes over to the judges and in unison their faces go from thinly veiled cynicism to drop-jawed wonder.

She closes the number; the crowd rises to its feet; and once the applause had subsided, Simon Cowell from the judges' bench says, "I knew we were about to hear something extraordinary, and I was right," to the collective eye roll and groan of everyone else there.

Because the reaction, the catharsis even, came from the same place. They were all thinking the same thing: what they heard was not supposed to come from someone like that.

I wonder if the look that came across the face of those judges, that sudden move into drop-jawed wonder, was the kind of look that came across Peter's face, there in Cornelius's house, surrounded by all of Cornelius's household and friends and relatives. Because he had to have been thinking the same thing too: what he heard was not supposed to come from people like that.

If you've been with us the past two weeks, you'll remember how Peter got there, but to offer a quick recap, Peter was traveling around visiting believers in the early church, and one day on the rooftop of a house he was staying at, he had a vision of all these animals coming down from heaven on a giant sheet. But then a voice said, "Get up; kill and eat." And he protests, because eating some of the animals he saw would've been against Jewish law and tradition. Then a voice said, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." And that's it. So Peter's just confused at that point.

But just then some men sent by a man named Cornelius arrive and ask Peter to come with them. You see, Cornelius, in another town 40 miles away, had received another vision to send for Peter. Cornelius was a faithful man, but not a Christian per se, rather a Gentile convert to Judaism, which didn't happen very often: why? Because at the time, Jews by law typically did not associate with Gentiles.

But Peter, led by the Spirit, goes with them, meets Cornelius, along with the crowd of friends and relatives Cornelius had invited to his house, and then starts to realize why he was there. His vision wasn't about food; it was about the people gathered there, this group of Gentiles, people he really wasn't supposed to be around, yet there they were.

It says something pretty powerful that there were all these people there. Remember, Cornelius and, presumably, everyone else in his household and all the friends and relatives he invited were not Christians. Cornelius was a God-fearing man but wouldn't have proclaimed, "Jesus is Lord!" He wouldn't have even known what that meant.

Still, Cornelius had invited these people he was close to to hear from this man Peter, who himself he did not know. Cornelius wasn't a part of a church. He didn't know what Peter would say. He just followed the instructions from a vision and then invited his friends and relatives to hear it too. That's how important it was to him.

That alone is staggering, because in comparison, here we are, joined as a church, joined in the name of Christ, which in theory we hold and proclaim as being of highest importance, life and death, the very purpose of existence, and yet I wonder, how many times have we invited friends and family to be a part of it?

But it doesn't seem like he had to cajole all these folks into coming. Even though they weren't Christian, they came, based on the invitation of their friend, of someone they trusted, but I suspect also because of something deeper, a yearning, a restlessness that nothing in this world could satisfy for them.

There's a well-worn trail of columns and blog posts bemoaning the decline in church attendance the past thirty years in the United States. A lot of that commentary seems to focus on younger generations: something like "the Millennials and Gen Z are leaving the church in droves," or something like that. And it's partially true. Verified over and over by various Barna studies, Church involvement and connection have declined among younger generations. The part that often gets left out though is that the rate of decline in church connection is pretty similar no matter the age group. The Millennials aren't going to church as much, and neither are the Boomers. In fact, 36% fewer adults were regularly connected in a church today than almost thirty years earlier.

And that could and should be somewhat alarming, because across the board, it seems, folks are saying, "Church? Yeah maybe not." When polled for reasons why, you get answers that probably aren't surprising. The church is messy, and not messy in the good ways we've talked about the past two weeks. Messy in bad ways. The church is seen as just one scandal or abuse after another, as discredited. Or the church is seen not as a witness to Jesus but as some activist wing for partisan hackery. But the biggest reason? It's the thought that you don't need church to connect to God. I'll do it on my own. The church has too much baggage anyway.

But before we dive too much into the doom and gloom, there were some glimmers of hope in the statistics out of these Barna studies. Connection in churches declined, but you know what held steady over that same time period? Regular prayer, and regular reading of the Bible. Those two things are kind of baffling, because you would think if folks were less and less connected in church, then you'd see less and less of practices like prayer and Scripture, but that didn't happen. What does that tell us?

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September 18, 2022

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But on occasion, even he could be surprised.

That night, thirteen years ago, an act came out on stage, and immediately Simon, along with everyone else dismissed her. If you’ve seen those shows, you know they plant a few clunkers in the early rounds, someone who is just delusional about their voice, when in reality they’re really bad, so, for the ratings I guess. What does it say about us, by the way, that we’ll tune-in in droves to watch people make fools of themselves?

So someone came out on stage that Simon and everyone else thought was going to be one of those joke acts. Her name was Susan Boyle. Some of you may remember this. Susan Boyle comes out with kind of frizzy, messy hair, and more generally, imagine in your mind the profile of someone, whether that’s age, appearance, clothing, whatever, whom you would think most likely to be going out for fame and stardom on a show like *American Idol* or *Britain’s Got Talent*. Imagine what that person would look like in your mind. I’d wager the person you’re imagining is not someone like Susan Boyle.

She comes out on stage and answers a few questions. Right out of the gates, no one was taking her seriously. She had a really thick accent too, so folks were kind of figuring that the producers had teed up another joke act for entertainment value.

Then the music starts. It was the opening bars of the song “I Dreamed a Dream” from the musical *Les Miserables*. If you don’t know that song, it’s this emotional ballad, a solo, about how the character’s life had gone from bad to worse, really heartbreaking actually, and if you have this particular role in the musical, “I Dreamed a Dream” is your time to shine. A showstopper, sort of thing.

So then, folks in the audience start snickering, because not only does this lady not look the part at all, but she has the presumption to come out on stage and sing something like “I Dreamed a Dream.” So as the opening bars start playing, everyone there thought the same thing: “This is a joke.”

And then, she started singing.

A voice of power and grace cut off everyone’s snickering and stunned them into silence. Right after she hit those first notes, the camera goes over to the judges and in unison their faces go from thinly veiled cynicism to drop-jawed wonder.

She closes the number; the crowd rises to its feet; and once the applause had subsided, Simon Cowell from the judges' bench says, "I knew we were about to hear something extraordinary, and I was right," to the collective eye roll and groan of everyone else there.

Because the reaction, the catharsis even, came from the same place. They were all thinking the same thing: what they heard was not supposed to come from someone like that.

I wonder if the look that came across the face of those judges, that sudden move into drop-jawed wonder, was the kind of look that came across Peter's face, there in Cornelius's house, surrounded by all of Cornelius's household and friends and relatives. Because he had to have been thinking the same thing too: what he heard was not supposed to come from people like that.

If you've been with us the past two weeks, you'll remember how Peter got there, but to offer a quick recap, Peter was traveling around visiting believers in the early church, and one day on the rooftop of a house he was staying at, he had a vision of all these animals coming down from heaven on a giant sheet. But then a voice said, "Get up; kill and eat." And he protests, because eating some of the animals he saw would've been against Jewish law and tradition. Then a voice said, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." And that's it. So Peter's just confused at that point.

But just then some men sent by a man named Cornelius arrive and ask Peter to come with them. You see, Cornelius, in another town 40 miles away, had received another vision to send for Peter. Cornelius was a faithful man, but not a Christian per se, rather a Gentile convert to Judaism, which didn't happen very often: why? Because at the time, Jews by law typically did not associate with Gentiles.

But Peter, led by the Spirit, goes with them, meets Cornelius, along with the crowd of friends and relatives Cornelius had invited to his house, and then starts to realize why he was there. His vision wasn't about food; it was about the people gathered there, this group of Gentiles, people he really wasn't supposed to be around, yet there they were.

It says something pretty powerful that there were all these people there. Remember, Cornelius and, presumably, everyone else in his household and all the friends and relatives he invited were not Christians. Cornelius was a God-fearing man but wouldn't have proclaimed, "Jesus is Lord!" He wouldn't have even known what that meant.

Still, Cornelius had invited these people he was close to to hear from this man Peter, who himself he did not know. Cornelius wasn't a part of a church. He didn't know what Peter would say. He just followed the instructions from a vision and then invited his friends and relatives to hear it too. That's how important it was to him.

That alone is staggering, because in comparison, here we are, joined as a church, joined in the name of Christ, which in theory we hold and proclaim as being of highest importance, life and death, the very purpose of existence, and yet I wonder, how many times have we invited friends and family to be a part of it?

But it doesn't seem like he had to cajole all these folks into coming. Even though they weren't Christian, they came, based on the invitation of their friend, of someone they trusted, but I suspect also because of something deeper, a yearning, a restlessness that nothing in this world could satisfy for them.

There's a well-worn trail of columns and blog posts bemoaning the decline in church attendance the past thirty years in the United States. A lot of that commentary seems to focus on younger generations: something like "the Millennials and Gen Z are leaving the church in droves," or something like that. And it's partially true. Verified over and over by various Barna studies, Church involvement and connection have declined among younger generations. The part that often gets left out though is that the rate of decline in church connection is pretty similar no matter the age group. The Millennials aren't going to church as much, and neither are the Boomers. In fact, 36% fewer adults were regularly connected in a church today than almost thirty years earlier.

And that could and should be somewhat alarming, because across the board, it seems, folks are saying, "Church? Yeah maybe not." When polled for reasons why, you get answers that probably aren't surprising. The church is messy, and not messy in the good ways we've talked about the past two weeks. Messy in bad ways. The church is seen as just one scandal or abuse after another, as discredited. Or the church is seen not as a witness to Jesus but as some activist wing for partisan hackery. But the biggest reason? It's the thought that you don't need church to connect to God. I'll do it on my own. The church has too much baggage anyway.

But before we dive too much into the doom and gloom, there were some glimmers of hope in the statistics out of these Barna studies. Connection in churches declined, but you know what held steady over that same time period? Regular prayer, and regular reading of the Bible. Those two things are kind of baffling, because you would think if folks were less and less connected in church, then you'd see less and less of practices like prayer and Scripture, but that didn't happen. What does that tell us?

Well, among the things it could tell us, I believe, is that the same yearning, the same restlessness that nothing in this world could satisfy that brought that crowd together in Cornelius's house is very much still at work today.

Put simply, though the church may require a bit of course correction, our innate longing for God hasn't gone anywhere. The question is, what's the church going to do about it?

Well, if Peter is any guide in this, one place to start is to talk about Jesus. Did you notice that about his address to this crowd? Peter had never spoken to a group like this in his life. A house full of Gentiles, people with little to no awareness of Jewish Scripture (Cornelius presumably had some). So does Peter come up with some slick new angle? He proclaims that God shows no partiality, there in v. 34, but then what does he say after that? He just talks about Jesus, about his ministry, about his death, about his resurrection, wrapping up in the good news there in v. 43: “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Sometimes the church, perhaps driven by a bit of anxiety at those stats I cited earlier, can stumble over itself trying to be “relevant,” or “contemporary,” or whatever adjective you want to use. The gospel indeed must be translated and reinterpreted in every place and every age, but at the end of the day, we’re just talking about Jesus.

But ultimately, and I never noticed this about this passage until this week, it wasn’t Peter’s charisma or preaching that really did anything. V. 44 says, “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.” “While Peter was still speaking.” Peter wasn’t done with his sermon. The Spirit of God interrupted him. Can you believe that? I mean the nerve. Interrupting a sermon, for Christ’s sake.

The people there in the room start speaking in tongues—and if any of you have questions about what that means, let’s talk more, but it was seen then as a common sign of the Spirit’s work as one comes to faith. Here’s what was amazing, though: for Peter, that sort of thing was only supposed to happen among Jewish converts, because that was the church, Jewish converts to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, the risen Lord. The notion that sounds like that could come from people like those there in that room, Gentiles, didn’t compute. For Peter, this was his Susan Boyle moment, mouth drop-jawed in awe and astonishment.

And Peter realizes that this whole thing, his vision, his journey, this whole messy ordeal of him stumbling into this situation, wasn’t about what he would say or how he would minister to this group, or even about how inclusive he was being associating with Gentiles. It’s as if the Holy Spirit was saying, “You know, good on you Peter for spending time with these folks, but this isn’t about how nice and accommodating you are. I’m showing you something.”

And that something would come to change the church forever, for it showed that the good news of this Jesus, and fellowship into which the Spirit drew Christ’s believers, wasn’t going to be just a Jewish thing, but an everybody thing. And it that didn’t come about because Peter was so slick a communicator. The Spirit interrupted him, after all. I mean, talk about messy.

Peter, the one to whom Christ himself had said, “Upon this rock I shall build my church,” Peter, the one who himself gave the very first sermon on Pentecost, Peter one of the leaders in the early church, was offering some words, another fine sermon, and no doubt he had a great ending planned, something stirring with a point of application or inspiration, and the Spirit cuts him off.

And he had the faith to see that sometimes the best thing you can do is stop preaching and see what the Spirit is doing. At some point, you can’t argue with your own ears. Susan Boyle has a fantastic voice. So Peter says, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And they’re all baptized.

Friends, the work of the church is still and always will be messy, but perhaps we’ve gotten a bit too consumed with finishing our sermons, so to speak, with completing what we had planned out, with going about things the way we’re used to doing them, and not open enough to see how the Spirit of God in his messy, astonishing, unexpected ways might be at work in the hearts of those who aren’t too high on this church thing. Maybe we haven’t been open enough for the Spirit to interrupt us. Sometimes the best thing you can do is stop preaching and see what the Spirit is doing. Sometimes the best thing you can do is stop preaching.

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I wonder if the look that came across the face of those judges, that sudden move into drop-jawed wonder, was the kind of look that came across Peter's face, there in Cornelius's house, surrounded by all of Cornelius's household and friends and relatives. Because he had to have been thinking the same thing too: what he heard was not supposed to come from people like that.

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It says something pretty powerful that there were all these people there. Remember, Cornelius and, presumably, everyone else in his household and all the friends and relatives he invited were not Christians. Cornelius was a God-fearing man but wouldn't have proclaimed, "Jesus is Lord!" He wouldn't have even known what that meant.

Still, Cornelius had invited these people he was close to to hear from this man Peter, who himself he did not know. Cornelius wasn't a part of a church. He didn't know what Peter would say. He just followed the instructions from a vision and then invited his friends and relatives to hear it too. That's how important it was to him.

That alone is staggering, because in comparison, here we are, joined as a church, joined in the name of Christ, which in theory we hold and proclaim as being of highest importance, life and death, the very purpose of existence, and yet I wonder, how many times have we invited friends and family to be a part of it?

But it doesn't seem like he had to cajole all these folks into coming. Even though they weren't Christian, they came, based on the invitation of their friend, of someone they trusted, but I suspect also because of something deeper, a yearning, a restlessness that nothing in this world could satisfy for them.

There's a well-worn trail of columns and blog posts bemoaning the decline in church attendance the past thirty years in the United States. A lot of that commentary seems to focus on younger generations: something like "the Millennials and Gen Z are leaving the church in droves," or something like that. And it's partially true. Verified over and over by various Barna studies, Church involvement and connection have declined among younger generations. The part that often gets left out though is that the rate of decline in church connection is pretty similar no matter the age group. The Millennials aren't going to church as much, and neither are the Boomers. In fact, 36% fewer adults were regularly connected in a church today than almost thirty years earlier.

And that could and should be somewhat alarming, because across the board, it seems, folks are saying, "Church? Yeah maybe not." When polled for reasons why, you get answers that probably aren't surprising. The church is messy, and not messy in the good ways we've talked about the past two weeks. Messy in bad ways. The church is seen as just one scandal or abuse after another, as discredited. Or the church is seen not as a witness to Jesus but as some activist wing for partisan hackery. But the biggest reason? It's the thought that you don't need church to connect to God. I'll do it on my own. The church has too much baggage anyway.

But before we dive too much into the doom and gloom, there were some glimmers of hope in the statistics out of these Barna studies. Connection in churches declined, but you know what held steady over that same time period? Regular prayer, and regular reading of the Bible. Those two things are kind of baffling, because you would think if folks were less and less connected in church, then you'd see less and less of practices like prayer and Scripture, but that didn't happen. What does that tell us?

Well, among the things it could tell us, I believe, is that the same yearning, the same restlessness that nothing in this world could satisfy that brought that crowd together in Cornelius's house is very much still at work today.

Put simply, though the church may require a bit of course correction, our innate longing for God hasn't gone anywhere. The question is, what's the church going to do about it?

Well, if Peter is any guide in this, one place to start is to talk about Jesus. Did you notice that about his address to this crowd? Peter had never spoken to a group like this in his life. A house full of Gentiles, people with little to no awareness of Jewish Scripture (Cornelius presumably had some). So does Peter come up with some slick new angle? He proclaims that God shows no partiality, there in v. 34, but then what does he say after that? He just talks about Jesus, about his ministry, about his death, about his resurrection, wrapping up in the good news there in v. 43: “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Sometimes the church, perhaps driven by a bit of anxiety at those stats I cited earlier, can stumble over itself trying to be “relevant,” or “contemporary,” or whatever adjective you want to use. The gospel indeed must be translated and reinterpreted in every place and every age, but at the end of the day, we’re just talking about Jesus.

But ultimately, and I never noticed this about this passage until this week, it wasn’t Peter’s charisma or preaching that really did anything. V. 44 says, “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.” “While Peter was still speaking.” Peter wasn’t done with his sermon. The Spirit of God interrupted him. Can you believe that? I mean the nerve. Interrupting a sermon, for Christ’s sake.

The people there in the room start speaking in tongues—and if any of you have questions about what that means, let’s talk more, but it was seen then as a common sign of the Spirit’s work as one comes to faith. Here’s what was amazing, though: for Peter, that sort of thing was only supposed to happen among Jewish converts, because that was the church, Jewish converts to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, the risen Lord. The notion that sounds like that could come from people like those there in that room, Gentiles, didn’t compute. For Peter, this was his Susan Boyle moment, mouth drop-jawed in awe and astonishment.

And Peter realizes that this whole thing, his vision, his journey, this whole messy ordeal of him stumbling into this situation, wasn’t about what he would say or how he would minister to this group, or even about how inclusive he was being associating with Gentiles. It’s as if the Holy Spirit was saying, “You know, good on you Peter for spending time with these folks, but this isn’t about how nice and accommodating you are. I’m showing you something.”

And that something would come to change the church forever, for it showed that the good news of this Jesus, and fellowship into which the Spirit drew Christ’s believers, wasn’t going to be just a Jewish thing, but an everybody thing. And it that didn’t come about because Peter was so slick a communicator. The Spirit interrupted him, after all. I mean, talk about messy.

Peter, the one to whom Christ himself had said, “Upon this rock I shall build my church,” Peter, the one who himself gave the very first sermon on Pentecost, Peter one of the leaders in the early church, was offering some words, another fine sermon, and no doubt he had a great ending planned, something stirring with a point of application or inspiration, and the Spirit cuts him off.

And he had the faith to see that sometimes the best thing you can do is stop preaching and see what the Spirit is doing. At some point, you can’t argue with your own ears. Susan Boyle has a fantastic voice. So Peter says, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And they’re all baptized.

Friends, the work of the church is still and always will be messy, but perhaps we’ve gotten a bit too consumed with finishing our sermons, so to speak, with completing what we had planned out, with going about things the way we’re used to doing them, and not open enough to see how the Spirit of God in his messy, astonishing, unexpected ways might be at work in the hearts of those who aren’t too high on this church thing. Maybe we haven’t been open enough for the Spirit to interrupt us. Sometimes the best thing you can do is stop preaching and see what the Spirit is doing. Sometimes the best thing you can do is stop preaching.

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³⁴ Then Peter began to speak to them: ‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. ³⁷ That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.’

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And that could and should be somewhat alarming, because across the board, it seems, folks are saying, "Church? Yeah maybe not." When polled for reasons why, you get answers that probably aren't surprising. The church is messy, and not messy in the good ways we've talked about the past two weeks. Messy in bad ways. The church is seen as just one scandal or abuse after another, as discredited. Or the church is seen not as a witness to Jesus but as some activist wing for partisan hackery. But the biggest reason? It's the thought that you don't need church to connect to God. I'll do it on my own. The church has too much baggage anyway.

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Well, if Peter is any guide in this, one place to start is to talk about Jesus. Did you notice that about his address to this crowd? Peter had never spoken to a group like this in his life. A house full of Gentiles, people with little to no awareness of Jewish Scripture (Cornelius presumably had some). So does Peter come up with some slick new angle? He proclaims that God shows no partiality, there in v. 34, but then what does he say after that? He just talks about Jesus, about his ministry, about his death, about his resurrection, wrapping up in the good news there in v. 43: “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

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The people there in the room start speaking in tongues—and if any of you have questions about what that means, let’s talk more, but it was seen then as a common sign of the Spirit’s work as one comes to faith. Here’s what was amazing, though: for Peter, that sort of thing was only supposed to happen among Jewish converts, because that was the church, Jewish converts to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, the risen Lord. The notion that sounds like that could come from people like those there in that room, Gentiles, didn’t compute. For Peter, this was his Susan Boyle moment, mouth drop-jawed in awe and astonishment.

And Peter realizes that this whole thing, his vision, his journey, this whole messy ordeal of him stumbling into this situation, wasn’t about what he would say or how he would minister to this group, or even about how inclusive he was being associating with Gentiles. It’s as if the Holy Spirit was saying, “You know, good on you Peter for spending time with these folks, but this isn’t about how nice and accommodating you are. I’m showing you something.”

And that something would come to change the church forever, for it showed that the good news of this Jesus, and fellowship into which the Spirit drew Christ’s believers, wasn’t going to be just a Jewish thing, but an everybody thing. And it that didn’t come about because Peter was so slick a communicator. The Spirit interrupted him, after all. I mean, talk about messy.

Peter, the one to whom Christ himself had said, “Upon this rock I shall build my church,” Peter, the one who himself gave the very first sermon on Pentecost, Peter one of the leaders in the early church, was offering some words, another fine sermon, and no doubt he had a great ending planned, something stirring with a point of application or inspiration, and the Spirit cuts him off.

And he had the faith to see that sometimes the best thing you can do is stop preaching and see what the Spirit is doing. At some point, you can’t argue with your own ears. Susan Boyle has a fantastic voice. So Peter says, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And they’re all baptized.

Friends, the work of the church is still and always will be messy, but perhaps we’ve gotten a bit too consumed with finishing our sermons, so to speak, with completing what we had planned out, with going about things the way we’re used to doing them, and not open enough to see how the Spirit of God in his messy, astonishing, unexpected ways might be at work in the hearts of those who aren’t too high on this church thing. Maybe we haven’t been open enough for the Spirit to interrupt us. Sometimes the best thing you can do is stop preaching and see what the Spirit is doing. Sometimes the best thing you can do is stop preaching.

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That night, thirteen years ago, an act came out on stage, and immediately Simon, along with everyone else dismissed her. If you’ve seen those shows, you know they plant a few clunkers in the early rounds, someone who is just delusional about their voice, when in reality they’re really bad, so, for the ratings I guess. What does it say about us, by the way, that we’ll tune-in in droves to watch people make fools of themselves?

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Then the music starts. It was the opening bars of the song “I Dreamed a Dream” from the musical *Les Miserables*. If you don’t know that song, it’s this emotional ballad, a solo, about how the character’s life had gone from bad to worse, really heartbreaking actually, and if you have this particular role in the musical, “I Dreamed a Dream” is your time to shine. A showstopper, sort of thing.

So then, folks in the audience start snickering, because not only does this lady not look the part at all, but she has the presumption to come out on stage and sing something like “I Dreamed a Dream.” So as the opening bars start playing, everyone there thought the same thing: “This is a joke.”

And then, she started singing.

A voice of power and grace cut off everyone’s snickering and stunned them into silence. Right after she hit those first notes, the camera goes over to the judges and in unison their faces go from thinly veiled cynicism to drop-jawed wonder.

She closes the number; the crowd rises to its feet; and once the applause had subsided, Simon Cowell from the judges' bench says, "I knew we were about to hear something extraordinary, and I was right," to the collective eye roll and groan of everyone else there.

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I wonder if the look that came across the face of those judges, that sudden move into drop-jawed wonder, was the kind of look that came across Peter's face, there in Cornelius's house, surrounded by all of Cornelius's household and friends and relatives. Because he had to have been thinking the same thing too: what he heard was not supposed to come from people like that.

If you've been with us the past two weeks, you'll remember how Peter got there, but to offer a quick recap, Peter was traveling around visiting believers in the early church, and one day on the rooftop of a house he was staying at, he had a vision of all these animals coming down from heaven on a giant sheet. But then a voice said, "Get up; kill and eat." And he protests, because eating some of the animals he saw would've been against Jewish law and tradition. Then a voice said, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." And that's it. So Peter's just confused at that point.

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Sometimes the church, perhaps driven by a bit of anxiety at those stats I cited earlier, can stumble over itself trying to be “relevant,” or “contemporary,” or whatever adjective you want to use. The gospel indeed must be translated and reinterpreted in every place and every age, but at the end of the day, we’re just talking about Jesus.

But ultimately, and I never noticed this about this passage until this week, it wasn’t Peter’s charisma or preaching that really did anything. V. 44 says, “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.” “While Peter was still speaking.” Peter wasn’t done with his sermon. The Spirit of God interrupted him. Can you believe that? I mean the nerve. Interrupting a sermon, for Christ’s sake.

The people there in the room start speaking in tongues—and if any of you have questions about what that means, let’s talk more, but it was seen then as a common sign of the Spirit’s work as one comes to faith. Here’s what was amazing, though: for Peter, that sort of thing was only supposed to happen among Jewish converts, because that was the church, Jewish converts to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, the risen Lord. The notion that sounds like that could come from people like those there in that room, Gentiles, didn’t compute. For Peter, this was his Susan Boyle moment, mouth drop-jawed in awe and astonishment.

And Peter realizes that this whole thing, his vision, his journey, this whole messy ordeal of him stumbling into this situation, wasn’t about what he would say or how he would minister to this group, or even about how inclusive he was being associating with Gentiles. It’s as if the Holy Spirit was saying, “You know, good on you Peter for spending time with these folks, but this isn’t about how nice and accommodating you are. I’m showing you something.”

And that something would come to change the church forever, for it showed that the good news of this Jesus, and fellowship into which the Spirit drew Christ’s believers, wasn’t going to be just a Jewish thing, but an everybody thing. And it that didn’t come about because Peter was so slick a communicator. The Spirit interrupted him, after all. I mean, talk about messy.

Peter, the one to whom Christ himself had said, “Upon this rock I shall build my church,” Peter, the one who himself gave the very first sermon on Pentecost, Peter one of the leaders in the early church, was offering some words, another fine sermon, and no doubt he had a great ending planned, something stirring with a point of application or inspiration, and the Spirit cuts him off.

And he had the faith to see that sometimes the best thing you can do is stop preaching and see what the Spirit is doing. At some point, you can’t argue with your own ears. Susan Boyle has a fantastic voice. So Peter says, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And they’re all baptized.

Friends, the work of the church is still and always will be messy, but perhaps we’ve gotten a bit too consumed with finishing our sermons, so to speak, with completing what we had planned out, with going about things the way we’re used to doing them, and not open enough to see how the Spirit of God in his messy, astonishing, unexpected ways might be at work in the hearts of those who aren’t too high on this church thing. Maybe we haven’t been open enough for the Spirit to interrupt us. Sometimes the best thing you can do is stop preaching and see what the Spirit is doing. Sometimes the best thing you can do is stop preaching.

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Stumbling: Holy Audibles”

Dr. Jay Howell

Acts 10:34-48

September 18, 2022

Next week we’ll wrap up this series we’ve been in the past six weeks called “Stumbling,” so let me offer a word of what’s coming up. After we finish up next week, the following week, October 2, we’ll celebrate World Communion Sunday, and we’ll welcome the Rev. Mary Nebelsick from the Presbyterian Mission Agency who will be preaching that morning.

Today, though we’ll wrap up this “Stumbling” series next week, we’re finishing a three-week stretch in chapter 10 of the Book of Acts, which covers an incident that changes the church forever. Let’s go to God’s Word.

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak to them: ‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. ³⁷ That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.’

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 10:34-48

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

“I knew we were about to see something extraordinary.” That’s what Simon Cowell said one night about thirteen years ago. Simon Cowell is a British TV personality who was one of the first judges on the shows *American Idol* and a British equivalent *Britain’s Got Talent*. His whole schtick had been to be kind of a jerk.

But on occasion, even he could be surprised.

That night, thirteen years ago, an act came out on stage, and immediately Simon, along with everyone else dismissed her. If you’ve seen those shows, you know they plant a few clunkers in the early rounds, someone who is just delusional about their voice, when in reality they’re really bad, so, for the ratings I guess. What does it say about us, by the way, that we’ll tune-in in droves to watch people make fools of themselves?

So someone came out on stage that Simon and everyone else thought was going to be one of those joke acts. Her name was Susan Boyle. Some of you may remember this. Susan Boyle comes out with kind of frizzy, messy hair, and more generally, imagine in your mind the profile of someone, whether that’s age, appearance, clothing, whatever, whom you would think most likely to be going out for fame and stardom on a show like *American Idol* or *Britain’s Got Talent*. Imagine what that person would look like in your mind. I’d wager the person you’re imagining is not someone like Susan Boyle.

She comes out on stage and answers a few questions. Right out of the gates, no one was taking her seriously. She had a really thick accent too, so folks were kind of figuring that the producers had teed up another joke act for entertainment value.

Then the music starts. It was the opening bars of the song “I Dreamed a Dream” from the musical *Les Miserables*. If you don’t know that song, it’s this emotional ballad, a solo, about how the character’s life had gone from bad to worse, really heartbreaking actually, and if you have this particular role in the musical, “I Dreamed a Dream” is your time to shine. A showstopper, sort of thing.

So then, folks in the audience start snickering, because not only does this lady not look the part at all, but she has the presumption to come out on stage and sing something like “I Dreamed a Dream.” So as the opening bars start playing, everyone there thought the same thing: “This is a joke.”

And then, she started singing.

A voice of power and grace cut off everyone’s snickering and stunned them into silence. Right after she hit those first notes, the camera goes over to the judges and in unison their faces go from thinly veiled cynicism to drop-jawed wonder.

She closes the number; the crowd rises to its feet; and once the applause had subsided, Simon Cowell from the judges' bench says, "I knew we were about to hear something extraordinary, and I was right," to the collective eye roll and groan of everyone else there.

Because the reaction, the catharsis even, came from the same place. They were all thinking the same thing: what they heard was not supposed to come from someone like that.

I wonder if the look that came across the face of those judges, that sudden move into drop-jawed wonder, was the kind of look that came across Peter's face, there in Cornelius's house, surrounded by all of Cornelius's household and friends and relatives. Because he had to have been thinking the same thing too: what he heard was not supposed to come from people like that.

If you've been with us the past two weeks, you'll remember how Peter got there, but to offer a quick recap, Peter was traveling around visiting believers in the early church, and one day on the rooftop of a house he was staying at, he had a vision of all these animals coming down from heaven on a giant sheet. But then a voice said, "Get up; kill and eat." And he protests, because eating some of the animals he saw would've been against Jewish law and tradition. Then a voice said, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." And that's it. So Peter's just confused at that point.

But just then some men sent by a man named Cornelius arrive and ask Peter to come with them. You see, Cornelius, in another town 40 miles away, had received another vision to send for Peter. Cornelius was a faithful man, but not a Christian per se, rather a Gentile convert to Judaism, which didn't happen very often: why? Because at the time, Jews by law typically did not associate with Gentiles.

But Peter, led by the Spirit, goes with them, meets Cornelius, along with the crowd of friends and relatives Cornelius had invited to his house, and then starts to realize why he was there. His vision wasn't about food; it was about the people gathered there, this group of Gentiles, people he really wasn't supposed to be around, yet there they were.

It says something pretty powerful that there were all these people there. Remember, Cornelius and, presumably, everyone else in his household and all the friends and relatives he invited were not Christians. Cornelius was a God-fearing man but wouldn't have proclaimed, "Jesus is Lord!" He wouldn't have even known what that meant.

Still, Cornelius had invited these people he was close to to hear from this man Peter, who himself he did not know. Cornelius wasn't a part of a church. He didn't know what Peter would say. He just followed the instructions from a vision and then invited his friends and relatives to hear it too. That's how important it was to him.

That alone is staggering, because in comparison, here we are, joined as a church, joined in the name of Christ, which in theory we hold and proclaim as being of highest importance, life and death, the very purpose of existence, and yet I wonder, how many times have we invited friends and family to be a part of it?

But it doesn't seem like he had to cajole all these folks into coming. Even though they weren't Christian, they came, based on the invitation of their friend, of someone they trusted, but I suspect also because of something deeper, a yearning, a restlessness that nothing in this world could satisfy for them.

There's a well-worn trail of columns and blog posts bemoaning the decline in church attendance the past thirty years in the United States. A lot of that commentary seems to focus on younger generations: something like "the Millennials and Gen Z are leaving the church in droves," or something like that. And it's partially true. Verified over and over by various Barna studies, Church involvement and connection have declined among younger generations. The part that often gets left out though is that the rate of decline in church connection is pretty similar no matter the age group. The Millennials aren't going to church as much, and neither are the Boomers. In fact, 36% fewer adults were regularly connected in a church today than almost thirty years earlier.

And that could and should be somewhat alarming, because across the board, it seems, folks are saying, "Church? Yeah maybe not." When polled for reasons why, you get answers that probably aren't surprising. The church is messy, and not messy in the good ways we've talked about the past two weeks. Messy in bad ways. The church is seen as just one scandal or abuse after another, as discredited. Or the church is seen not as a witness to Jesus but as some activist wing for partisan hackery. But the biggest reason? It's the thought that you don't need church to connect to God. I'll do it on my own. The church has too much baggage anyway.

But before we dive too much into the doom and gloom, there were some glimmers of hope in the statistics out of these Barna studies. Connection in churches declined, but you know what held steady over that same time period? Regular prayer, and regular reading of the Bible. Those two things are kind of baffling, because you would think if folks were less and less connected in church, then you'd see less and less of practices like prayer and Scripture, but that didn't happen. What does that tell us?

Well, among the things it could tell us, I believe, is that the same yearning, the same restlessness that nothing in this world could satisfy that brought that crowd together in Cornelius's house is very much still at work today.

Put simply, though the church may require a bit of course correction, our innate longing for God hasn't gone anywhere. The question is, what's the church going to do about it?

Well, if Peter is any guide in this, one place to start is to talk about Jesus. Did you notice that about his address to this crowd? Peter had never spoken to a group like this in his life. A house full of Gentiles, people with little to no awareness of Jewish Scripture (Cornelius presumably had some). So does Peter come up with some slick new angle? He proclaims that God shows no partiality, there in v. 34, but then what does he say after that? He just talks about Jesus, about his ministry, about his death, about his resurrection, wrapping up in the good news there in v. 43: “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

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