

SERMON TEXT FOR EASTER 6B
PREACHED MAY 6, 2017 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA
TEXT: Acts 11.19-30

It looks like a burger, cooks like a burger, tastes like a burger, and even "bleeds" like a burger. But there's no beef in it. Instead, the burger is made out of a plant-based beef alternative, with "bleeding" that comes from beet juice. The burger is produced by a company called Beyond Meat, and you can now buy them at Whole Foods. They are located right next to the real meat, so you can make your own decision about plant versus animal protein.

How many of you have thought about buying an all-electric or hybrid car (or maybe you already own one)? These cars used to be quite rare, but in recent years have gained popularity - so much so that the entirely-gas-powered automobile may soon be a thing of the past. And speaking of cars, imagine how self-driving cars are going to change our lives in a few years!

Throughout history, positive changes have relied on disruptions. And not surprisingly, the church has encountered this phenomenon as well. According to the book of Acts, the early Christians in Jerusalem were people who had grown up Jewish. They had been taught never to associate with uncircumcised, unclean people like the Gentiles of the Greek and Roman world.

Enter the disruption. One day in Caesarea, a Gentile name Cornelius had a vision from God in which he was told to send for the apostle Peter. Meanwhile, the apostle Peter had a dream in which foods deemed "unclean" in Judaism came floating down from heaven, and a voice told Peter to eat. But Peter, being the good Jewish lad that he was, could not eat unclean food, even in a dream.

Then a voice said to him in the dream, *"What God has made clean, you must not call profane."* So Peter began proclaiming that while once it was unlawful for Jews to visit with Gentiles, God had shown him that no one should be excluded, even those who eat burgers that bleed beet juice.

Peter preached the good news about Jesus to Cornelius and his friends and relatives, and the book of Acts tells us that while Peter was speaking, *"the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word."* Yes, the Spirit fell on all who heard the word: Gentiles and Jews. It was a Spirit-driven disruption, one that actually interrupted the preaching of Peter.

The Jewish believers were *"astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles."* Astonished. Gobsmailed. Blown away. They were like meat-eaters tasting their first Beyond Burger, or passengers in a driverless car. They had a difficult time grasping that non-Jews were speaking in tongues and extolling God.

Peter was perceptive enough to know that he was in the middle of a spiritual disruption and a radical change for this fledgling church. He asked his fellow believers: *"Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit?"* Well, you could hear a pin drop. No one said a word, so Peter ordered Cornelius and his family and friends to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Normal operations had been disrupted, and they would never go back to the way they were before. The falling of the Spirit on the Gentiles began a new era in the life of the church. By making this change, God was enabling the Gentiles to hear the gospel and be part of the community of faith - something that Jewish purity laws had previously prohibited.

Of course we know that change - disruptions like the one Peter initiated - are always difficult, and not only for the early church. We haven't gotten any better at it these last 2000 years, my friends!

In conversation with friends this past Thursday (and, by the way, we hit the two no-no areas of conversation - religion and politics - all in the same evening, and we're still friends), one of my friends remarked, "The church in 10 years or 50 years is going to look nothing like it does now." Other theologians of our time agree with her assessment, as do I. Many of us will not be around to see what actually occurs, how in fact the church will be different, but others will be the very ones making those changes.

With a renewed interest in evangelism here, we are hoping that some new folks will walk through our doors and worship with us or join us for fellowship events - or that they will become part of our extended family through off-campus events in the community. What we need to be prepared for is that, 1) they will come; 2) they make look and act and dress and believe things completely differently than we do; and 3) they may change our current culture. Are we prepared to accept them as the early church accepted the Gentiles?

When Peter reported this experience to the church in Jerusalem, he encountered resistance and criticism. But he concluded his report by asking a question that silenced his critics, *"If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"* What a great question. *"Who was I that I could hinder God?"* Who are we to resist a Spirit-driven disruption? If God wants us to change and do a new thing, who are we to say no?

Remember that Jesus healed on the Sabbath, touched menstruating women, welcomed little children, and preferred the company of sinners over saints. In all these ways, he favored the diversity of God's people over the purity of Judaism's religious laws. Jesus was never afraid to push for change, even in the face of opposition. He was a Spirit-driven disrupter. Jesus changed the world of religion by taking an old approach to purity and replacing it with a new and better one. And today he asks us to move in this new direction with him. Jesus wants us to be part of the movement of inclusion that was seen so clearly when the Spirit fell on the Gentiles and welcomed them into the community of believers.

"Who was I that I could hinder God?" Peter asked. Who are we to resist a Spirit-driven disruption? If God wants us to change and do a new thing, who are we to say no?