

## **"Act with Acceptance"**

**ACT UP - Small Group Campaign Fall 2017**

**October 15, 2017**

**North East United Methodist Church**

**Rev. Dr. Drew M. Christian**

*26 As for Philip, an angel of the Lord said to him, "Go south down the desert road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza." 27 So he started out, and he met the treasurer of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under the Kandake, the queen of Ethiopia. The eunuch had gone to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and he was now returning. Seated in his carriage, he was reading aloud from the book of the prophet Isaiah.*

*29 The Holy Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and walk along beside the carriage."*

*30 Philip ran over and heard the man reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"*

*31 The man replied, "How can I, unless someone instructs me?" And he urged Philip to come up into the carriage and sit with him.*

*32 The passage of Scripture he had been reading was this:*

*"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter.*

*And as a lamb is silent before the shearers,  
he did not open his mouth.*

*33 He was humiliated and received no justice.*

*Who can speak of his descendants?  
For his life was taken from the earth."*

*34 The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, was the prophet talking about himself or someone else?" 35 So beginning with this same Scripture, Philip told him the Good News about Jesus.*

*36 As they rode along, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "Look! There's some water! Why can't I be baptized?" 38 He ordered the carriage to stop, and they went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.*

-Acts 8:26-38

*9 Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers. So he went to the high priest. 2 He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains.*

*3 As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?"*

5 "Who are you, lord?" Saul asked.

And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! 6 Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

-Acts 9:1-6

15 But the Lord said [to Ananias], "Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. 16 And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake."

17 So Ananias went and found Saul. He laid his hands on him and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 Instantly something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized. 19 Afterward he ate some food and regained his strength.

Saul stayed with the believers in Damascus for a few days. 20 And immediately he began preaching about Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is indeed the Son of God!"

-Acts 9:15-20

9 Peter went up on the flat roof to pray. It was about noon, 10 and he was hungry. But while a meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. 11 He saw the sky open, and something like a large sheet was let down by its four corners. 12 In the sheet were all sorts of animals, reptiles, and birds. 13 Then a voice said to him, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat them."

14 "No, Lord," Peter declared. "I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure and unclean."

15 But the voice spoke again: "Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean." 16 The same vision was repeated three times. Then the sheet was suddenly pulled up to heaven.

17 Peter was very perplexed. What could the vision mean? Just then the men sent by Cornelius found Simon's house. Standing outside the gate, 18 they asked if a man named Simon Peter was staying there.

19 Meanwhile, as Peter was puzzling over the vision, the Holy Spirit said to him, "Three men have come looking for you. 20 Get up, go downstairs, and go with them without hesitation. Don't worry, for I have sent them."

21 So Peter went down and said, "I'm the man you are looking for. Why have you come?"

22 They said, "We were sent by Cornelius, a Roman officer. He is a devout and God-fearing man, well respected by all the Jews. A holy angel instructed him to summon you to his house so that he can hear your message." 23 So Peter invited the men to stay for the night. The next day he went with them, accompanied by some of the brothers from Joppa.

24 They arrived in Caesarea the following day. Cornelius was waiting for them and had called together his relatives and close friends. 25 As Peter entered his home, Cornelius fell at his feet and worshiped him...

*...34 Then Peter replied, "I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism. 35 In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right. 36 This is the message of Good News for the people of Israel—that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all...*

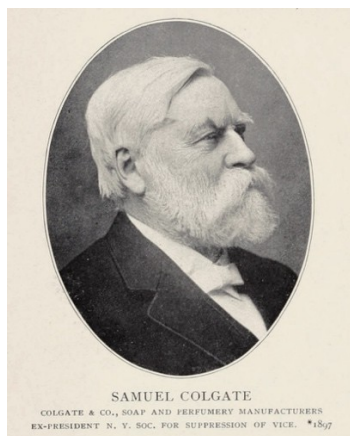
*...44 Even as Peter was saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the message. 45 The Jewish believers who came with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, too. 46 For they heard them speaking in other tongues and praising God.*

*Then Peter asked, 47 "Can anyone object to their being baptized, now that they have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?" 48 So he gave orders for them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ...*

-Acts 10:9-25, 34-35, 44-48

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Samuel Colgate, son of the founder of the Colgate business empire, William Colgate, was a devout Christian, and he told of an incident that took place in the church he attended.



During an evangelistic service, an invitation was given at the close of the sermon for all those who wished to turn their lives over to Christ and be forgiven. One of the first persons to walk down the aisle and kneel at the altar was a well-known prostitute. She knelt in very real repentance, she wept, she asked God to forgive her. Then she stood and testified that she believed God had forgiven her for her past life, and she now wanted to become a member of the church. For a few moments, the silence was deafening as people balked at the thought of a well-known prostitute being a member of their congregation.

Finally, Samuel Colgate arose and said, "*I guess we blundered when we prayed that the Lord would save sinners. We forgot to specify what kind of sinners. We'd better ask him to forgive us for this oversight. The Holy Spirit has touched this woman and made her truly repentant, but the Lord apparently doesn't understand that she's not the type we want him to rescue. We'd better spell it out for him just which sinners we had in mind.*" Immediately, a motion was made and unanimously approved that the woman be accepted into membership in the congregation.

Who is accepted in the Kingdom of God, in our congregation, in our lives?

The early church is growing...the Holy Spirit has come and filled the apostles and others empowering them to go forth and speak the name of Jesus...thousands have believed...but just as the church is beginning to take-off so is persecution against it...and Stephen, one of the seven chosen to care for the Greek widows, becomes the first martyr as he is stoned to death in the street...



Rembrandt Harmensz. Van Rijn  
*The Stoning of St. Stephen*

...the men leading that stoning lay their coats at a young man named Saul, a radical Pharisee intent on arresting those who profess to follow Christ...the new Christians scatter, running for their lives, and in scattering, they take their message about Jesus out of Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria.

It is then we see the Holy Spirit do something amazing...suddenly the Spirit is moving and touching hearts of men and women outside the Jewish

community...men and women considered outcasts by Jews are beginning to put their faith in Christ and show evidence of the Holy Spirit in their lives...including a highly placed official in the court of the Queen of Ethiopia and a Roman Gentile soldier...Even more surprising, God's Holy Spirit gets hold of a Jewish persecutor of the church...the young man who held the coats of those who stoned Stephen to death in the streets of Jerusalem...and now, his name changed, he is calling on people to put their faith in Jesus Christ rather than persecuting those who do...

**Acts 8:26-38 - Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”**

**Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.**

**“How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.**

**This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:**

**“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,  
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.**

**In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.  
Who can speak of his descendants?  
For his life was taken from the earth.”**

**The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.**

**As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my**

***being baptized?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.***

Philip encounters an Ethiopian eunuch...



...He exotic, powerful and pious...dark-skinned African...inhabitant of the ancient kingdom of Meroe (what is now northern Sudan)...This man is powerful, the chief treasurer of a kingdom which was a conduit for goods from the rest of the continent. Philip tells the eunuch the good news about Jesus. Christ is the key to salvation, the one whose arrival the prophets of the Old Testament spoke about. Philip answers the eunuch's question and explains to the Ethiopian that Jesus, the righteous sufferer, crucified and risen again, has won the victory over sin and death, and now repentance and forgiveness of sins are available in his name.

And now we see those accepted into the Kingdom of God expanded...as the Ethiopian eunuch is baptized...accepting Christ as Savior...the Holy Spirit is making it clear that no apparent obstacle--whether physical defect, race or geographical remoteness--can place a person beyond the saving call of the good news.

Not even enemies of Christ are beyond God's touch as we see in the story of Saul...



Hans Speckaert  
*Conversion of St. Paul  
 on the Road to Damascus*

...who on the road to Damacus was touched by Christ...who fell to the ground...and who heard a voice reply, *“I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”* He followed Jesus' instructions and went into the city to see a man named Ananias...a Greek Jew...God had told Ananias not to be afraid of Saul, whose name would be changed to Paul, for he would be God's *“chosen instrument to take [His] message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel.”* The message of Christ...the salvation of God...was to be available to all people...Gentile and Jew...king and pauper...

But God is not done...

Acts 10:9-20, 23-25, 34-35, 44-48 - ***About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”***

***“Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”***

***The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”***

***This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven...***

***...While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them”...***

***...The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers from Joppa went along. The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence...***

***...Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right...***

***...While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.***

***Then Peter said, “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.***





Petrus von den unreinen Tieren  
*Vision of Saint Peter*

God sends Peter a vision, not once, but three times to make sure he understood it...it was a total reversal of something Peter grew up believing, something he held dear to his heart...

Suddenly Peter found himself in the home of a Gentile...a Roman officer at that...a devout Jew did not enter the home of a Gentile let alone eat with them...but Peter realizes *"that God shows no favoritism. In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right. This is the message of Good News for the people of Israel—that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all..."*

The scriptures tell us that *"Even as Peter was saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the message. The Jewish believers who came with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, too. For they heard them speaking in other tongues and praising God."*

As Charles Yrigoyen writes, *"We dare not limit the potential of the gospel and power of the Spirit to change people. Those whose deeds seem to us to be totally contrary to God's will and welfare of the whole human community may be completely transformed by God's grace. The least likely should be included in our prayers. The caring ministry of the church*

*should reach out to them. There is always new life with fresh possibilities where Jesus Christ is Lord."*

Pastor John Burke tells the story of two women, lesbians, who decided to come to his church for fun...to see how much they could push the buttons of those who called themselves Christians...The one girl Amy had heard that the church's motto was "*Come as you are*" and she later told Pastor Burke that she wanted to prove that the church was "*come as you are...unless you're gay.*"

*"I came on a mission to shock people," Amy admits. "Rachel and I would hold hands in front of people, but instead of the disgusted looks of contempt we expected, people met eyes with us and treated us like real people. So we started coming to church weekly. We kept moving closer to the front each week, trying to get a reaction so that we'd be rejected sooner rather than later. When we couldn't shock people, we stopped trying and started learning."*

*"Not long after that, Rachel and I stopped seeing each other, but I kept coming to church because I was searching for something," Amy admits. "The more I listened and learned about the teachings of Jesus, the more I started to actually believe that God really did love me. I heard more and more about being His masterpiece, and in time, I actually started to believe it. The more I believed God actually could see something of value in me, the more I trusted Him."*

Over time, Amy slowly opened her heart and struggles to Christ.

Pastor John Burke writes, "*Seven years later, Amy leads our ministry to help people find healing and wholeness from all kinds of sexual and relational struggles. She's helping others become God's restored masterpiece.*"

Do you see the journey...often we get the process backwards...we want to change the person...have them stop their bad behavior...before we accept them...yet, if we accept them...show them the love of Christ...perhaps they

will want to know where the non-judgmental love they are experiencing through you and I comes from...perhaps this will lead them to open their hearts to Christ...and then once they have that relationship with Christ, it will be Christ who will change their behavior and begin to grow them into His likeness...

Pastor John Burke goes on to say, *"Do you realize that Jesus is not shocked by the shocking things people do? Jesus knew Zacchaeus had robbed people blind and profited off much unethical behavior, yet Jesus was not shocked. He did not offer Zach correction, but relationship...Jesus knew that the Samaritan woman at the well had been married and divorced five times. He knew about her current "hookup" and how sexually entangled she was with the guy she was living with. Jesus was not repulsed. None of this kept Jesus away or kept Him from offering her living water. Maybe Jesus wants Christ-followers who will be less like the Pharisees and more like Him—unshockable."*

Are there people who would not feel accepted in the Kingdom of God, in our congregation, in our lives?

The story comes from Zig Ziglar's book, See You At The Top. He tells about an old man who stood on a Virginia riverbank many years ago. He was waiting to cross the river and, since it was bitterly cold and there were no bridges, he would have to "catch a ride" to the other side. After a lengthy wait he spotted a group of horsemen approaching. He let the first one pass, then the second, third, fourth and fifth. One rider remained. As he drew abreast, the old man looked him in the eye and said, "Sir, would you give me a ride across the river?"

The rider immediately replied, *"Certainly."* Once across the river, the old man slid to the ground. *"Sir,"* the rider said before leaving. *"I could not help but notice that you permitted all the other men to pass without asking for a ride. Then, when I drew abreast, you immediately asked me to carry you across. I am curious as to why you didn't ask them and you did ask me."*

The old man quietly responded, *"I looked into their eyes and could see no love and knew in my own heart it would be useless to ask for a ride. But when I looked into your eyes, I saw compassion, love and the willingness to help. I knew you would be glad to give me a ride across the river."*

The rider was touched. *"I'm grateful for what you are saying,"* he said. *"I appreciate it very much."* With that, Thomas Jefferson turned and rode off to the White House.

Ziglar reminds us that our eyes are the windows of our souls. Then he asks a pointed question: *"If you had been the last rider, would the old man have asked you for a ride?"*

What do people see in your eyes? When they walk in the church? When you meet them on the street? At work? In school?

Do they see "shock" at their behavior? Do they see "judgment"? Or do they see "unconditional love"? "Acceptance"? "Welcome"? Do they see an understanding behind your eyes that God loves everyone, including them?

As John Ortberg writes, *"To accept people is to be for them. It is to recognize that it is a very good thing that these people are alive, and to long for the best for them. It does not, of course, mean to approve of everything they do. It means to continue to want what is best for their souls no matter what they do."*



Bernardo Cavallino

*St. Peter and Cornelius the Centurion*

*Then Peter replied, “I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism. In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right. This is the message of Good News for the people of Israel—that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all”...Even as Peter was saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the message. The Jewish believers who came with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, too. For they heard them speaking in other tongues and praising God. Then Peter asked, “Can anyone object to their being baptized, now that they have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?” So he gave orders for them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ...*