

Gentile disruption. Throughout history, positive changes have relied on disruptions. The early Christians in Jerusalem, according to the book of Acts, were people raised Jewish. They learned never to associate with Gentiles (non-Jews) and other unclean peoples of the Greek and Roman world. Then comes this disruption: "*What God has made clean, you must not call profane*" (v. 15). *This is an earth-shattering, world-changing, faith magnifying verse, upending centuries of Jewish dietary customs and cultural traditions!*

Here's how it happened. One day in Caesarea, Cornelius, a Gentile, received 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."

On meeting Cornelius, Peter acknowledged it was unlawful for Jews to visit with Gentiles, but then he reported God had shown him he "*should not call anyone profane or unclean*" (v. 28). 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 Acts tells us that while Peter was speaking, "*the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word*" (v. 44). That's right! The Spirit fell on *all* who heard the word. Gentiles and Jews. It was a Spirit-driven disruption, one that 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*" (v. 45). Utterly astonished. Dumbfounded. Flabbergasted. Startled, stunned, and stupefied. They were like meat-eaters tasting their first Beyond Burger. Or passengers in a driverless car. They had a hard time grasping that non-Jews received spiritual gifts and praised the One, True God.

Peter recognized this was a spiritual disruption and a radical change, and he accepted the new reality being born. He asked his fellow believers: "*Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit?*" (v. 47). 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 being disrupted, they could never go back to the way they were before.

A new era for a young church. The falling of the Spirit on the Gentiles inaugurated a new era in the life of the church. By making this change, God enabled the Gentiles to hear the gospel and be part of the community of faith, something that Jewish purity laws previously prohibited. "One of the first lessons the early Church had to learn was how to accept the Samaritan, [the] Gentile and even [the] eunuch who believed in Jesus Christ as Savior," writes M. Craig Barnes, president of Princeton Theological Seminary. But disruption is always difficult, and our church today is still "learning how to accept the stranger God has chosen to include in the community of Christian faith."

When Peter reported this experience to the church in Jerusalem, he encountered resistance and criticism. 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?*" (11:17). What a great question. "Who am I to 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 disagree?

Disruption can create tension. The tension in the Jerusalem church was between purity and diversity, a struggle that we still experience today. Around the church, we see some Christians who believe in purity: people who want to enforce traditional morality and beloved theological dogmas. Other Christians are proponents of diversity who want to accept a broader range of theological and cultural perspectives.

Disagreements are bound to arise in a time of disruption. Christians don't all agree on issues of sexuality, medical ethics, the ordination of women, the morality of war, or the nature of Jesus Christ. Such tensions are particularly tricky because they do not all break down clearly into right and wrong or good versus evil. The delicate balance between purity and diversity or orthodoxy and heterodoxy is one that challenges both pastors and church members. We see it in the Christian community, and we feel it in ourselves.

Jesus was disruptive. But when should we let go of the past and move into a new era? It helps to get a word from the Lord, such as the guidance Peter received in Acts. But until we do, the church can do no better than to follow the example of Jesus, who showed a willingness to break established purity laws and minister to outcasts.

Remember that Jesus healed on the Sabbath, spoke to women, welcomed children, and generally preferred the company of sinners over saints. Jesus was never afraid to push for change, even in the face of opposition. Jesus 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. In Jesus, "a purity of law turns into a purity of love," observes Susan Andrews, former moderator of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). This is a purity of love "embodied in the gracious and hospitable ministry of Jesus Christ."

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus came up with a new and better religious system, and today he asks us to move in this new direction with him. He challenges us to get to know the immigrant from Africa who lives down the street, to reach out to the neighborhood teen who is isolated and alone, to adopt the child with a disability who needs specialized care, to support the young woman with the problem pregnancy, to invite young singles to church, and to visit the elderly members in their homes. 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.

Purity of love. Diversity and inclusion. That's what Jesus was all about, and it is a movement that he advanced through the power of the Holy Spirit. It was disruptive then, and it is disruptive today. But it is precisely what a Spirit-filled church should be doing.

Our challenge as Christians is to reach new people as well, following the example of Jesus and the inspiration of the Spirit. Our Spirit-driven acceptance of diversity and our Christ-inspired purity of love is something that the world needs now, more than ever. When we welcome the Spirit's disruptions, we create a space for people to experience the unconditional love of God and the gracious welcome of Jesus Christ.

Prayer: God of Love, You are with us in every transition and change. As we enter into this new era with excitement and even some anxiety, we recall your deep compassion, presence, and abounding love. We thank you for the gifts, talents and skills with which you have blessed us. We thank you for the experiences that have brought us to this moment. We thank you for the work of others that gives breadth and depth to our own work. Be with us as we move forward, rejoicing with you and supporting one another. We ask this in your Holy Name. Amen.

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Spirit-Driven Disruptions

Sunday, May 6, 2018

Acts 10:44-48

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Sometimes, a technology, invention or new device arrives on the market and makes such a splash that it disrupts the entire industry. Change usually requires some amount of disruption. The smartphone as well as the personal computer are examples. These innovations disrupted the normal pace and pattern of life. Let me share a few other disruptions beginning to make an impact.

If you're hankering for a burger, but don't want the beef, try the new "Beyond Burger." 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. This is a "health-driven disruption."

Electric cars disrupted the auto industry. It used to be that electric cars were rare: hybrids like the Toyota Prius had some degree of popularity. But now, everyone, including Ford, General Motors, Daimler and others, is rushing for a share of the electric car market. The gas-powered automobile may soon be a thing of the past.

Speaking of cars, imagine how self-driving cars are going to disrupt the *status quo*! There are at least 10 industries or professions that will experience significant disruption as self-driving cars hit the road in a few years: parking, real estate, law enforcement, insurance, legal professionals, hotels, media and entertainment, food and package delivery, auto repair and auto manufacturing.

One more example: hydroponics, growing crops without soil, is going to disrupt agriculture. Hydroponics is not new technology, but it is now becoming a commercially viable method of growing plants. Hydroponics has the potential for major disruption in the agricultural community.