



When You Least Expect It, Expect It!

Acts 10

August 6, 2006

This week at Vacation Bible School, I was introduced to a new method of Christian education -- the cream pie in the face. Here's how it worked: at the end of each evening, the boys and girls were asked questions about the Bible story of the day. The first four kids to answer correctly were invited to draw a name of one of the teachers, and then to throw a cream pie in their face. Those boys and girls made sure they knew that Bible story! A great teaching tool, the cream pie.

I was "pied" twice. As I was wiping the cream off my face, I found myself wanting to point at my pint-sized assailants and say, "When you least expect it...expect it!" You know how that works. Someone plays a trick on you, and then you begin to plot your revenge. But you do so slowly, in no hurry, so your former assailant will forget that he is now your target, and start to let down his guard. Perhaps while he sleeps one night, you will spray piles of shaving cream on either side of his pillow. Or perhaps you imagine putting a garter snake in her lunch box. And one day, when they least expect it, you get them. Oh, revenge is sweet.

When you least expect it, expect it. That's not just a human saying, it's a God thing too. Oh yes, I believe God has said that more than once, but with one important difference: what God plots is often not revenge, but grace.

Take the worst thing that anyone has ever done to God, which would be what? It would be when people killed his Son. Jesus, God's greatest gift to humanity, was rejected, tortured, and then executed as a criminal. Now if you or I had been God, we would have said, "When you least expect it, expect it." And we would plan for the destruction of the world.

But God started plotting for the salvation of the world. When the world least expected it, when Jesus' body was in the tomb for three days already, God raised his Son up alive again. You see, the world plots revenge, but God plots grace when you least expect it. And that has been the story of God and humanity ever since.

For example, when Stephen, a deacon of the church, was stoned to death, and most of the believers were scattered to the four winds by persecution, it seemed like the end of the church. But when the Church least expected it, people in Samaria started believing and following Jesus. And when Philip least expected it, he found himself face to face with a Treasurer from far-off Ethiopia, who asked Philip to baptize him, and who took the gospel to his end of the earth. And when the believers least expected it, Saul, their number one persecutor, was blindsided by Jesus on the road to Damascus and

became a believer. From Samaria to Ethiopia to the number one enemy of the Church, whenever the Church least expected, God was plotting grace, transforming strangers and even enemies into believers.

Today I've been reading to you the story of Peter and Cornelius. They are another example of God plotting grace when it was least expected. It was as shocking to Peter and Cornelius as a cream pie in the face. For Cornelius, it came as a vision of the angel of God, telling Cornelius to send to Joppa for Simon Peter. For Peter, it came in a hunger-induced trance, revealing all kinds of creatures dropping down from heaven, creatures that Peter's religion had taught were too unclean to eat. But the voice of the Lord commanded, "Rise Peter, kill and eat." When Peter heard that Voice say "What (or who) God has made clean, you must not call profane," it was more shocking than a pie in the face.

When Peter woke up, Cornelius' men were knocking at the door for him. So Peter did something he never dreamed he would ever do: he went up the beach with Gentiles and a Roman soldier toward Caesarea and Cornelius.

When Peter and Cornelius did meet, God's plot came to its culmination with a double conversion. Peter converted to a whole new understanding, and said, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality. Cornelius and all of his house converted to follow Christ. It was so obvious to Peter that God's Spirit had come upon them that he felt he had no choice but to baptize these profane unclean people as his brothers and sisters in Christ. "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people?" The answer went without saying.

All of this is to say: When you least expect it, expect God to save the last person you'd ever dream could be saved. The implications of that truth are staggering.

For one thing, it means that the gospel is for all people. That was a new idea for Peter, and it is still sometimes hard for the Church to comprehend. But we're beginning to get it. In the last forty years in Wilson we have come from that Thanksgiving Day when the Klan marched in on an interracial service in this Sanctuary, to this past week when Christ Temple of Praise and First Baptist Church enjoyed a wonderful Vacation Bible School together. As my brother pastor, Michael Bell, would say, "God is pleased with that. God smiles on that." And we felt God's blessing upon us this week.

But there is still something within us that keeps us from fully embracing the truth that the gospel is for all people. There are still people that we would write off as hopeless—people we honestly don't think will ever respond to God. We just don't seem them as receptive to God at all. Now receptivity is important. Skilled evangelists teach us to "go where the fish are biting," go to where people are responsive to the gospel. Some folks are far away from being interested while other folks are downright receptive. So it makes sense to spend one's time on the receptive folks and not waste time with the unreceptive. A girl who has always known the love of Jesus in her home, who feels at age twelve that it's time for her decision is very receptive. A man who has been a

Buddhist monk for thirty years will not be receptive. If you had to choose which person to invest your energy and time with, of course you'd give the girl your attention. That would be wise. Receptivity is important.

But sometimes there will be a surprise. Someone who by all rights should not be receptive to the gospel does become receptive. Take Cornelius, for example. He was a Roman centurion from Italy, a hard-bitten non-commissioned officer who led one hundred soldiers. He was a foreigner and an occupier. Yet verse two reveals that Cornelius was also a devout man, who feared God, who gave alms generously to the poor, and who prayed constantly to God. In other words, Cornelius was already obeying the two Great Commands of Jesus: love God, and love your neighbor. Cornelius, the absolute last person one would expect to be interested in Jesus, had become hungry for word of the gospel!

When you least expect the grace of God, expect it, even today. How many of you remember Alice Cooper? Alice Cooper was, and is, a male rock singer. He was the quintessential shock rocker of the seventies. He was alcohol and razor blades. His concerts were a theatre of twisted sex and violence and outrage. He would simulate chopping up a baby with an axe, and other sinister acts.

Where is Alice Cooper now? He is leading a Christian foundation called Solid Rock to build a teen activity center at Grand Canyon University in Phoenix, Arizona. He is intent on providing a place where middle-school children can find safety and boundaries and, yes, Jesus. "We're not going to beat them over the head with a Bible," he says, "But we're certainly going to be available to tell them that that's available to them."

Alice Cooper, youth evangelist? When he is home in Phoenix, he says he works for his Solid Rock Foundation and does "everything that a father and a husband's supposed to do." He says, "I watched all of my best friends – Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Keith Moon—every one of them, die trying to live their image." Now Cooper is trying to save youth in his community from gangs and meth and introduce them to the gospel.

What's that mean for us? Never write anyone off. That's what Peter learned when he saw the Spirit of God come upon, of all people, a Roman centurion. That's what God is challenging us to see:

- Who have you been writing off? Who have you been overlooking because you can't conceive he or she would ever be receptive to the gospel?
- What would it take for you to notice those around you who are hungry to hear about the gospel? A strange dream like Peter's vision of unclean animals coming down from the heavens? Or a shock rocker bringing Jesus to his community? Or some other cream pie from God in your face?

God is plotting grace. God is plotting to show you someone who is ready for the gospel.
God is plotting to transform that someone from a hard case into a new creation.

When you least expect it, expect it.

-- Douglas E. Murray