

PEOPLE ARE MORE THAN THEY APPEAR (ACTS 10:44-48)

Sermon by the Rev. Corinne Hodges, Sun., May 17, 2009, SJOC

- I. Back from DC where we saw the White House, Lincoln Memorial, The Mall, Washington Monument, National Cathedral, big names and big places. But of everything we saw, the most memorable was a space created by someone I bet none of you have heard of, a person, who held a simple, mundane job, someone who I am sure went unnoticed by many people most of the days of his life: James Hampton. **Surprised**
 - A. Born in South Carolina 1909, the son of Baptist minister, moved to Wash., DC as a young man and worked as a janitor. Little else known, did not attend church, led a solitary, simple life. Little did anyone know that for ten years, Hampton had been creating an incredible work of art dedicated to God. Each night as he returned home, Hampton would escape to a garage he rented, where he built an art environment titled, "The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly." Using found objects to create pieces, covered in layers of gold and silver foil, Hampton created an amazing world and art piece, dedicated to his own creator and this art work now is housed, believe it or not, in the Smithsonian Museum of American Art!!! I try to imagine what this man looked like, but also what was the reaction of the people who discovered this incredible work after Hampton's death in 1964. Opening the garage to find the throne, the tables, the entire room filled with a decade of work to God. What a **surprise** that must have been! And after knowing of his simple, unassuming life, to discover such creativity, vibrancy, such faith, incredible!
- II. **Acts is a book also full of surprises** and our lesson today teaches or reinforces a lesson to Peter, much like those learned when they opened that door that held Hampton's incredible work.
 - A. Need to hear the beginning of **story of Cornelius**
 - B. Cornelius is a Roman gentile, non-Jew, yes, but considered unclean, impure
 - C. Peter about not entering house, not eating meal
 - D. God is revealing to Peter a new message—Gentile Pentecost
 - E. God's salvation and saving love is offered to all believers, not just Jewish, circumcised ones
 - F. To this message, Peter continues to be surprised—he needs reminders, even though the universal promise of God's divine love goes all the way back to God's promise to Abraham.
 - G. Peter is welcomed by Cornelius; he witnesses the military commander's great faith and hospitality, his openness and sincerity. Pious acts prove his spiritual faith and desire, willingness to repent, be responsive to

God's word. Not a member of the church, but knows he cannot deny him baptism, inclusion in the household of God

H. Big Aha! moment that revolutionizes Peter's thinking about who can be admitted into the covenant community

III. **Psalm today:** the nations, all the ends of the earth, all you lands

A. Boundaries we create for God's love and saving help are exactly that, our boundaries

B. Message today is that God through Christ is accessible to all who believe, not just Americans, people we like, think like us, not even just churchgoers

C. Hampton's example shows us that you do not need to be a churchgoer in order to believe...how many of us have given the kind of care, love, attention and work that Hampton did to God?

IV. Message today is similar to that of the story of Philip with the eunuch, also a man many would not consider worthy of God's love or a believer...of another land, stranger, impure or unfit because of his castration, hold him at a distance

A. And yet that eunuch believes, is loved by God and is baptized.

B. People are often more than they appear to be. We often do not see the depths of a person—Hampton on the outside, but on inside. Peter could see sincerity of Cornelius. God sees inside.

V. Second part of message is the real, hard look in the mirror: end of Psalm about **judgment**—cause of human-made categories--judgment

A. God is the judge—not us

B. The categories we create about who is in or out, worthy or not, acceptable or not, all that is done out of judgment

C. And judgment should be left for God

D. Readings today talk of love—nine times in two readings and that is our role, to love our neighbor, no matter who they are or are not...leave the judging to God

E. Acts reminds us again and again of the diversity of God's people. The people God calls include the Gentile Cornelius, the eunuch of last week, and Hampton, the creator of that amazing throne. The people God calls are wide, diverse and different...some may even surprise you.