

Last September I got to officiate an outdoor wedding in western Wisconsin. Yes, deep in the heart of enemy territory- Packers' Country! The wedding was for Amy's cousin Nick and his bride, Tessa. So having married into a Wisconsin girl's family, I learned long ago how to peacefully co-exist with fans of Green Bay's NFL team. Anyway, it was an absolutely beautiful day on the secluded and wooded property of Amy's Aunt. A Gazebo served as center stage with the bride and groom standing on the threshold and their wedding party by their sides as is the custom. A harpist provided the music for the 75 who were gathered in attendance and seated on nice white folding chairs. And actually one more guest decided to make an appearance and what's more to join the wedding party in front of the Gazebo. It was "Kota", the couple's beloved Chocolate Labrador. He had somehow got loose and came up and playfully ran around the bride and groom! But this all ended on a positive note as Kota soon after settled down and sat beside the bride and groom for the last half of the service! All's well that end well!

And that memorable day late last summer reminds me of a story I recently read about where in 2017 a couple in Brazil named Matheus and Marilia were getting married. They too had **planned** an outdoor ceremony, but a storm forced them under the shelter of a tent. Unfortunately for the guests, the storm brought a dog, not even a familiar pet, but rather- a dirty, stray animal from who knows where, and who could very well have been dangerous! Yes, they tried to shoo him away, but the dog was persistent. Each time he came right back. The third time that pup did the unthinkable. He plopped right down **on** the bride's long train as she was speaking her vow, and he went to sleep. Surprisingly, the bride left him there.

These two canines I've just described weren't the only "dogs" though who ever crashed a wedding. I'd like to talk about that today using the theme: ***Salvation Extends to All People!***

4. So, who were the "dogs"? They were the Gentiles. The Jews had other names for these people, including the heathen, loathsome, outsiders, and abominations. You get the picture. There wasn't much love between these two peoples. That's why the word concerning the Gentiles was so shocking! It had all to do with the incident that Peter had just experienced. As first described one chapter earlier in Acts 10, this apostle of the Lord had seen a vision. He then picked up and journeyed to the home of the Roman centurion named Cornelius. There Peter preached Christ, and Cornelius and his companions, too, had believed the Word of God. This was utterly amazing and

disconcerting. Shocking! This meant that Gentiles too, could be part of the wedding of Jesus and His Bride, the Church!

3. It shouldn't have been so surprising, though. These devout Jews should certainly have remembered what God said to Father Abraham many centuries before: "No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a *multitude* of nations" (Gen 17:5).

Then there was the parable Jesus taught. It was about a wedding feast, and those invited (the Jews) wouldn't come. What did the king do? Jesus explained: "Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.' And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests" (Mt 22:8-10). The wedding was filled, even with Gentiles! Those stray, unclean, so-called "dogs"!

2. This is what the Jews would be thinking. No wonder Peter was criticized: "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them" (v 3). The Jews were saying, "You ate with them, Peter. Don't you know you just don't do that? Don't you know you might become *like* them? Don't you know *they* are Gentiles, and *we* are Jews?"

But God did include them. The Gentiles were on God's guest list. There was room in heaven for them! Peter had to do some explaining. First, he told them about his vision. Then he gave evidence of the word of Jesus, and you know what? They were convinced. They allowed for the dog.

1. Our reading from Acts explains: "They glorified God, saying, 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life'" (v 18). This was news of epic proportions. This was huge! It shook up the world back then and should shake up yours and mine today.

The Bible says: "You are *all* sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal 3:26-29).

"For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'" (Rom 10:12-13).

Christ died for all! The sins of the whole world were nailed to the cross!

There it is again—there is no distinction, no "us" versus "them," no exclusive

club. It doesn't matter where the person is from, what they like or don't like, or who they're related to or are not related to. To God, salvation is open to all.

2. That means big things for us. Shocking things! It means there will actually be Packers fans in heaven, even Bears fans! And most shocking of all, it also means there won't be just Lutherans in heaven. (In fact everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved, that is all who trust in Christ as their only Savior from sin and death, the only way into heaven.)

That's good to remember, especially when new people walk into our church. Maybe they won't be dressed like you or related to you. They might not talk like you. They might even sit in your favorite pew, and we might be tempted to say: "Just who invited you?"

There are lots of "Gentiles" around us. They are our neighbors, co-workers, and classmates. They might be those who attend a different church or maybe don't attend at all. They are those you could never imagine within ten feet of heaven.

What would God have us do with them? It's easy, really. Love them. That's it. Love them because they, too, could be fellow believers in Christ. And if they're not? Love them anyway. They just might repent.

3. This is not saying we have to agree with and embrace what they believe. However, we can treat them like we would like to be treated. After all, doesn't the Bible make a promise about them too? "For God so loved the **world**, that he gave his only Son, that **whoever** believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). It sure does!

4. And that leads us back to the wedding crasher in Brazil that I talked about earlier. So how did that turn out? Did it end nice and peacefully as with the Wisconsin wedding crasher? Well, as the story goes, the dog came and **went**. The reception went on as planned and the couple was a little sad to see the dog disappear. But days later, they found him . . . they cleaned him up . . . adopted him . . . and named him Snoop. Who would have thought?

Then again, who would have thought God would find us, clean us up, and adopt us into His family through His Son Jesus Christ? Who would have thought that the Lord would give us a place at His table? Who would have thought He would have in His heart love for us strays? But He did! And there is plenty room for more. Amen.