

Acts 10:44-48

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. 45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, 46 for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 47 “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” 48 So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

THE VISION

Long ago the apostle Peter went up on the roof to pray at noon. The roof was relatively flat, and was often a popular retreat for prayer or relaxation.

But, noontime was not the usual time for prayer. As it is for us, noontime was the usual time for lunch.

So, as Peter began to pray, his stomach began to growl. And that’s when it happened. A strange vision came to this hungry man.

The Bible tells us that the heavens opened and something like a large sheet came down to earth filled with “four-footed animals, reptiles and birds.” A voice told Peter, “The lunch you have been praying for has arrived.”

Unfortunately, the lunch wasn’t kosher!

Peter was horrified at the thought of eating non-kosher food, but a voice told him, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

Peter saw this vision three times and then he came back to reality. There were some strangers at his gate. They were Gentiles so they didn’t come in the house. Instead, they called for Peter from the outside.

Peter went down from the roof to greet them. It seems that someone else had a vision as well.

He was a man by the name of Cornelius. And God told Cornelius to send his messengers to Peter. Peter invited these Gentile strangers into the house, and the next day he went to visit Cornelius at his home.

Cornelius told Peter about his own vision, about how God’s angel told him to invite Peter to his home and preach.

So, Peter preached did something that was forbidden by his faith. He entered the home of a Gentile. And in that home he preached the gospel.

Cornelius and his friends and family believed. In fact before the sermon was even over the Holy Spirit came upon them. Peter baptized them.

Peter then understood what his own vision was all about. The Spirit of God had declared these Gentiles to be kosher. And when God calls someone kosher who are we to hinder God?

Peter might have remembered the charge Jesus gave his disciples.

Before He ascended into heaven Jesus commissioned his disciples go from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria, and into the whole world with the good news of God's salvation, baptizing and making disciples.

As always, the disciples took a while to get the message.

But, now, after a resurrection and three visions, it seems like Peter was finally getting it through his thick skull.

GOD INTERRUPTS PETER

But, don't bet on it.

Peter was a lot like us. No matter how many times God's Spirit came into Peter's life, Peter kept insisting on doing things his own way. Peter, like so many of us, loved the sound of his own voice.

And so from time to time God had to interrupt Peter's little speeches in order to get him back on track.

Remember what happened on the mount of Transfiguration? Peter, James and John get to see Jesus in all his glory. And Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus. The disciples really don't know what to make of this, but not knowing what was going on never stopped Peter from talking.

Peter wants to build a monument on the mountaintop and stay in that place of glory. But, the Bible tells us while Peter was still speaking the voice of God interrupted and said, "This is my Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (Matthew 17:5)

Our lesson for today follows that same pattern.

While Peter was still speaking the Holy Spirit interrupted his sermon. The Holy Spirit came upon all those who heard his preaching. And that changed everything. The Bible tells us that these Gentiles received the Holy Spirit, and they started praising God.

Peter and his Jewish companions were absolutely astounded.

God was at work in a way that Peter and his companions had never imagined. The salvation of God was on the move. And once again Peter had to shut up and keep up with the surprising grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

To his credit in this case Peter seemed to get the message. He told his Jewish companions, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

And so Peter baptized these new converts and stayed with them for several days.

Good job Peter. You've finally learned to listen to the voice of God.

Well, that's not exactly true. Peter never quite got it. In the Bible we learn that God had to keep interrupting Peter for the rest of his life.

For example, in Paul's letter to the Galatians we read about a conflict between the Apostle Paul and Peter. The church at Antioch welcomed Gentiles into their fellowship. They ate together. (By the way, in those days there was no distinction between sacred meals and regular meals. If you ate with someone, it meant that you were part of his or her lives in a sacred and important way.)

So in Antioch the Spirit of God was doing something new.

The dividing wall between Jew and Gentile was eliminated. And when Peter came to Antioch he joined in the table fellowship. That's not surprising because earlier Peter had this vision telling him that God was going to make the unclean clean.

But, then some other Jewish Christians came to town, and they were not so tolerant. They believed that in order to become a Christian you had to first become a Jew. And they apparently rebuked Peter and the other Jews for welcoming Gentiles into their life.

Peter backs down. He quits attending these fellowship meals. And so do many others.

But, Paul will have none of it. He tells Peter to his face that he is a hypocrite. Excluding those whom God has chosen is wrong.

Peter knew that. In our lesson for today he recognizes that God has chosen these Gentiles. Baptizing these Gentiles was just a way of acknowledging what God's Spirit had already done in their hearts.

But, Peter had a habit of speaking boldly and then losing his nerve when challenged. And so, God though the power of the Spirit had to keep intervening in Peter's life, interrupting his long winded speeches and taking him down a road that he did not want to travel.

Maybe that's what the risen Christ meant when he met Peter by the seashore. Peter denied Jesus three times, and so Jesus gives Peter a chance to take it back. Three times Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" Peter says yes. And Jesus tells Peter to take care of his sheep and follow where his Spirit would lead.

Jesus concludes his reinstatement of Peter by saying that following him will not be a piece of cake. When he was young he got to do what he wanted to do, but that is no longer true. The Spirit would take him where he did not want to go. The Spirit would be interrupting his life for the rest of his life. (John 21:15-19)

This is what it means to follow Jesus. It means having our life interrupted by the Spirit. It means having our faithless actions challenged. It means welcoming new people into our life and helping them grow as disciples.

The grace of God is often surprising, and the grace of God often requires us to cross boundaries that we would rather not cross.

SALVATION FOR OUR ENEMIES

Our lesson for today is just a small part of a larger story.

These Gentiles who receive the Holy Spirit are not just any Gentiles. They are, as we noted before, the friends and family of a man named Cornelius. And who was this Cornelius, the first Gentile convert, the great-great-great granddaddy in the faith to all of us Johnny come lately Gentiles?

He was a Roman soldier, a Centurion. He was an officer in charge of the troops that had their boots on the necks of the Jews. In other words he was more than just a Gentile. He was an enemy of God's own people.

Can you see why everyone was astounded when these enemies received the Spirit of God and begin speaking in the language of faith?

We got a little sidetracked in one of our Bible studies as we speculated about what "speaking in tongues" might mean. To be honest with you I'm not entirely sure what it means.

Did it mean that the new converts spoke in a language that they did not know, perhaps praising God in Hebrew? Maybe. Did it mean these new converts are so overwhelmed by the Spirit of God that they praise God in some kind of ecstatic "spirit" language? Maybe.

But, whatever happened one thing we do know; this manifestation of the Spirit was enough to convince Peter of a hard truth. God was at work in the lives of these former enemies. God had accepted them into the family of faith, and now Peter and his Jewish companions would have to learn how to accept them in the church.

The Kingdom of God was wider and deeper than anyone had ever imagined.

BLAME IT ON THE HOLY SPIRIT

Peter did baptize these Gentiles, but he got into trouble for doing it. A little bit later in our story we learn that when the saints in Jerusalem heard that Peter had baptized a Roman Centurion they were really upset.

They asked Peter, “Why do you go to these Gentiles and break bread with them?” (Acts 11:3) Peter had a whole lot of explaining to do.

Jews were different. Among other things, God’s people ate kosher food and that set them apart from those unfaithful, pork eating unclean Gentiles. This was a time honored boundary had preserved Israel through good times and bad. This protective wall of Jewish law kept out the riffraff.

But, in one fell swoop Peter had taken down that protective wall by baptizing these Gentiles. The orthodox Jewish Christians wanted an explanation.

Peter’s explanation is simple: Don’t blame me. Blame it on the Holy Spirit. Peter said that before he could even finish his message the Holy Spirit descended upon these Gentiles so dramatically and undeniably that he couldn’t think of any reason not to baptize them. They didn’t have to change in any way because God had already chosen them.

This is an important moment in the life of the church. Once again the Holy Spirit takes over, and drags Peter and the other disciples to a place where they would rather not go.

And I think God continues to work with us in this way. God has a way of interrupting our life and dragging us kicking and screaming to a place where we would rather not go.

The Holy Spirit has a way of leaping over all boundaries. The Holy Spirit has a way of embracing those who are on the outside and bringing them into the family of faith. The Holy Spirit has a way of shutting us up and sitting us down.

Time and time again when we have too rigidly drawn our lines around the church and built up walls to protect the church, the Holy Spirit has taken us by the collar and pulled us out of our comfort zone. Time and time again the Holy Spirit reminds us that Jesus loves the world and gave himself for the world.

The Holy Spirit reminds us that the church does not exist for itself. The church exists to do God’s work in the world.

ACTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Our lesson for today comes from the book we call the Acts of the Apostles. But, I think the book is misnamed. It should be called instead the Acts of the Holy Spirit. It is a story of how the Holy Spirit took the church from being a Jewish sect centered in Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Just as the early church was prodded by the Holy Spirit to embrace new people and new forms of ministry so I think the Holy Spirit is prodding us to do the same. The church is often portrayed as a conservative institution that blesses the status quo. The church is that place that blesses where we are today or even wants to take us backward.

We often live up to that image.

But, all the stories in the Bible portray a God who is forever leading His people to a new place, a Promised Land, a new heaven and a new earth, a place that only God can show us. Instead of being the tied down, buttoned down place that it is, the church is called to be a place of constant change, led only by the Spirit of God.

Now I admit that makes it hard to plan. Church folk are always worried about survival, and we are always making plans for our survival.

But, the Spirit of God in Christ wants us to get beyond survival to revival. The Spirit of God in Christ transforms us. The Spirit of God in Christ brings about a new creation.

What exactly am I taking about? In some ways I would have to say that I don't know what I'm talking about because the Spirit often leads us ways that we couldn't imagine or expect. Like Peter we just need to shut up and listen.

But, the mighty acts of God in the past do give us a clue as to where God might be leading us in the future.

For example, long ago God chose someone who was outside the faith to become a part of the family of faith. More than that God chose someone who was an enemy of his chosen people.

But, Cornelius was not the enemy that the people imagined. The Scripture tells us that he feared God and that he was very generous to God's people.

We tend to paint our enemies and our adversaries with a broad brush and demonize them.

But, could there be enemies who have their good points? Might there be an opening to preach the gospel if only we had eyes to see and ears to hear? Sometimes in order to preach the gospel to the outsiders, God's people have to be changed as well.

A church growth expert was asked, "What do you do when you want your church to grow but your pastor won't lead in evangelism?" I thought the guy would say, "You need a different pastor."

But, that's not what he said. He said,

"If you want to change your church or your pastor, you need to go deeper spiritually; you will need to pray more and go deeper into Scripture. You need to get closer to the Holy Spirit."

In other words, don't worry about changing those other people. You have no control over them. Instead, open your life up to God's Spirit. One changed heart can transform a church.

Having had the opportunity these past few years to work with the church on the denominational level, I have come to appreciate truth of this statement.

We are forever rearranging the furniture in the larger church. We change our goals. We add and subtract committees.

Every two years we add and subtract items from the Presbyterian way of doing business, the Book of Order. We think that all of these changes are necessary for the church to grow and thrive.

And yet nothing seems to change.

Maybe we're going about this in the wrong way. Maybe we don't need new rules or new leaders. Maybe we need a new heart.

Maybe we need to pray more. Maybe we need to go deeper into Scripture. Maybe we need to wait upon the leading of God's Spirit instead of talking so much.

And when we do that, we begin to see that the river of God's grace is deeper and wider than we ever thought possible.

Down through the years, many have tried to define the Christian faith in a narrow way. Sometimes we began to think that our way was the only way. Sometimes we decided not to even associate with anyone who thought differently from us.

Unfortunately, some of the most contentious and unforgiving people in the world can also be very "religious" people. Indeed, many people think that the sole function of religion is to determine who is right and who is wrong, who is in and who is out.

But, that's not our job. That's God's job.

And I have a sneaking suspicion that God is quite a bit more inclusive and gracious than any of us could ever be.

Just when we think that we have this religion thing figured out, God lets down another sheet filled with taboos. God declares acceptable those things that we thought were unacceptable, and we have to rethink our position. Just when we think that we are about as open and accepting as a person can be, God in Christ stretches our mind and our heart just a little bit farther.

This passage teaches us that even among our so-called enemies there are those who are righteous and truly seek after God. Even among those whom we have written off as being beyond redemption, the power of the Holy Spirit is at work, communicating exciting new messages of truth and hope.

A professor at Princeton seminary talked about the fact that the church today faces what he called a “tsunami of change”. When we think about all the ways society, technology and culture are changing, it seems like a daunting and overwhelming task for the church to keep up and remain relevant. If we try to do this on our own it seems almost impossible.

But, today’s lesson reminds us that it’s not our responsibility to predict and control the future. The story of the church is not and has never been the story of our acts. The story of the church is not about what we can do and what we can accomplish.

The story of the church is about what the Spirit of the risen Christ is doing through us. The Spirit goes ahead of us. The Spirit empowers us. The Spirit gives us hope. The Spirit astounds us.

The acts of the Holy Spirit are just beginning.

Amen.