

“The Spirit of Change”

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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.

## NOT A KOSHER LUNCH

In the passage that precedes our lesson for today, Peter goes onto the roof at noon to pray. The roof was relatively flat, and was often a popular retreat for prayer or meditation.

But, noontime was not the usual time for prayer.

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.

## STRANGERS AT THE GATE

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 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 disagree?

## CORNELIEUS

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?

They were the most unlikely converts those early disciple could ever imagine.

## THE SPIRIT OF CHANGE

Have you ever changed your mind on something important?  
Have you ever decided that you were wrong in some significant way and that you needed to go in a different direction?

I suppose there are some of us so hard headed that we've never changed our mind.  
But, most of us have had to totally change our mind at one time or another.

And by and large we change our minds because we've learned to look at things differently. We've encountered facts that have caused us to question what we once believed.

But, sometimes the impetus for change comes not from the inside but from the outside.

I'm talking about the work of the Spirit.

We believe that the Spirit of the living God can fall on us and change us. The Spirit can change our minds and the Spirit can change our lives.

## PRESBYTERIAN OR PENTECOSTAL?

We know that in theory.

But, I've found that in practice we are a bit more reticent when it comes to the work of the Spirit here and now. If not why would the seven most popular words in the church still be, "We've always done it that way."

It's one thing to suggest that we, on our own and for our own good reasons, have decided to think about things in a different way. But, to suggest that divine intervention was at work in changing of our minds ... well, that's different.

It doesn't even sound very Presbyterian.  
It sounds more Pentecostal.  
And indeed it is!

Like those first disciples, we Presbyterians are reluctant to wait on the Spirit.

We prefer to be more proactive.

So, we put our faith in committees instead. Oh, we say that Holy Spirit is present in the work of the committees. But, I'm not so sure. Just look at what our committees have done.

Our committees produce rule books that get larger and more complex every year. And our motto seems to be "the best surprise is no surprise." We work day and night to make sure every "t" is crossed and every "i" is dotted.

We Presbyterians might believe in the work of the Spirit ... theoretically. But, we don't want to talk about it too much. The work of the Spirit seems too nebulous and out of control for our sensibilities.

We would prefer a hard and fast rule to cover every possible situation. In this way holiness can be quantified. Morality can be measured.

## THE LAW AND THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW

I must say that we come by this desire to have everything nailed down and sewed up honestly. Our older brothers and sisters in the faith, the Jews had the same idea.

The Hebrew Scriptures and the official commentaries on those Hebrew Scriptures are filled with dos and don'ts concerning the life of faith. What is allowed and what is forbidden is spelled out in minute detail.

This is a way to put boundaries on faith.  
This is a way to say who's in and who's out.

This is a way to give our faith shape and form. Our distinctiveness as a community of faith requires us to live in a different way because God has called us to be different

And there is some truth to that.

Holiness does mean living in such a way that it is apparent that we are God's people. We have a different culture. We have a life based not upon what we want but upon what God wants.

But, what if our religious rules and regulations were actually hindering the work of God's Spirit?

What if, in our desire to get closer to God, we actually managed to distance ourselves from God and from each other?

What if, in our desire to spell out in great detail what is right and wrong, we inadvertently hinder people from coming into the kingdom of God?

I'm afraid this does happen.

Our desire to be more holy can at times result in sinful separation.

## THE SPIRIT INTERRUPTS

So what can we do when our best efforts to follow God foster alienation and despair? What can we do when we follow the letter of the law instead of the Spirit of the law?

We can't *do* anything about this on our own.

Instead, we *need* a word from above.

We need divine intervention.

We need God to come into our lives in a new and unexpected way.

We are indeed a people who don't like surprises.

We like everything to be done decently and in order.

But in order to be faithful disciples sometimes we have to allow room for the surprising and disturbing intervention of the Spirit.

That's what happened in our lesson for today.

Peter and his fellow Jews are totally surprised, “astounded” by what happens.

The Bible tells us that “while Peter was still speaking”, the Holy Spirit fell upon those who listened.

Isn't that like the Holy Spirit to interrupt Peter's eloquent speech in order to give a sign of God's favor toward the Gentiles? In fact, this is a theme in the book of Acts. What the disciples are doing or saying is often interrupted by the action of the Spirit.

Today it's the Gentiles turn to be transformed by the power of the Spirit.

Now these Gentiles were not a part of God's chosen people before the coming of the Spirit. That's what the word “Gentile” means, those other folk who come from other nations.

These particular Gentiles may have admired the Jewish faith. But, they were not a part of God's nation. They were not kosher. They did not follow the letter of the law.

And yet, these Gentiles are filled with the Holy Spirit, just like those first disciples who received the Spirit at Pentecost. They are “speaking in tongues” and preaching the gospel.

What did this mean? It was mind boggling to those who first witnessed it.

We need to remember that early Christianity was essentially a Jewish sect. The first Christians were Jews who thought Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God.

But, aside from this one difference, these early Christians were Jewish through and through. And most of them thought that if a Gentile wanted to become a disciple of Jesus, he would have to become a Jew first.

God had a surprise for them.

## A WIDENESS IN GOD'S MERCY

The Holy Spirit had now come upon the Gentiles before they became converts to the Jewish faith. The power of God's grace and salvation were now evident in people that up until now they thought had been excluded.

Now since these Gentiles, these outsiders have received the Holy Spirit. What's to prevent them from being baptized?  
What's to prevent them from from being welcomed into the community of faith?

The answer?

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

So, Peter baptized them in the name of Jesus Christ.

That makes me wonder.

Exactly how wide is God's mercy?

How might God interrupt our speeches and our lives in order to demonstrate the life giving power of the Spirit? What might God do to change our minds about who's in and who's out in the kingdom of God?

I can't say for sure, but one thing we do know.

When the Spirit descends, like the Jewish disciples of old, we will be absolutely astounded and flabbergasted at the depth and width of God's mercy. We will see a God that is greater and more inclusive than we could ever imagine.

This is the dream, the vision upon which the early church was built.

## THE PENTECOSTAL MIRACLE OF FAITH

In a few weeks we will talk about the day of Pentecost.

What was the most amazing thing about Pentecost?

... that those first disciples spoke the gospel in foreign tongues? ... that they were surrounded by the flame of God's presence? ... that formerly fearful disciples became fearless proclaimers of the gospel?

All those things were amazing, but there was one thing more amazing.

It was the miracle of faith.

The gospel was communicated to people from all over the ancient world in their own language. And people *believed*. People were totally changed by the good news of God's grace.

Pentecost was a demonstration of God's love for the world, the whole world.

The gospel was preached far and near. The gospel was preached to friend and foe. The gospel was preached to those who were rich and those who were poor.

The gospel was even preached to those who bore some responsibility for the crucifixion of Christ.

And now the Spirit of God has reached down and touched the Gentiles. As Paul once put it, those who were far off have now come near.

#### BLAME IT ON THE SPIRIT

Peter did get into trouble for baptizing these Gentiles. When the saints in Jerusalem heard that Peter had baptized a Roman Centurion, they were quite 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.

## BEYOND SURVIVAL TO REVIVAL

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.

Last week I noted that the full title of the book of Acts is the “Acts of the Apostles”.

But, I thought 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 not about us and what we want to do. The church is about the Spirit and what the Spirit

The church is often portrayed as a conservative institution that doesn't want to change in any way.

And 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! You see, the Spirit often leads us in ways that we can't imagine or expect.

Like Peter sometimes we just need to shut up and listen.

## THE GOSPEL OF INCLUSION

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.

Our lesson for today is a good example.

God chose someone who was outside the faith to become a part of the family of faith.

More than that God chooses 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 some outside the faith be willing to come into the body of Christ?

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. We have to be astounded, flabbergasted by where the Spirit chooses to land.

May God interrupt us and astound us by the power of grace and mercy.

May we catch the vision a salvation that can cleanse us all.

Amen.