

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena Illinois
May 10, 2015 – Easter 6B

Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.

Text: Acts 10: 44-48

This text is not exactly the same as what was preached. A technical difficulty caused everything from the middle of page 3 to the end to disappear from the mobile device. Thus, the preacher, hopefully, guided by the Holy Spirit, had to proceed without notes for the remainder.

“While Peter was still speaking,” our first reading begins. And immediately, without our knowing the what or the why of his speech, the where or the how, the final action – we reach the climax of the story: “the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard.” “The circumcised believers were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.” Then Peter said, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

All who heard! Even the Gentiles! These people! And they were baptized, right then and there, in the name of Jesus Christ.

So much is left out. And that, I think, is tragic. We need to know and understand the bigger story. Not just because it was a tiny slice of the very beginnings the church, but because, though a tiny slice, it was part of the radical spread of Christ’s Good News that changed the world. It shows us a key struggle for the apostles – how and who to include – not just for the first century, not just for those who could be reached in that time and place. It is a pertinent and necessary model for us, even today.

This story follows on last week’s – Philip baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch who is banned from the Temple because the Law doesn’t permit those with mutilated bodies. But the man seeks understanding and asks, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” He is, perhaps, the first non-Jewish person to be baptized.

Philip was taken to this desolate road in Gaza by the Holy Spirit. And soon, that same Spirit comes to Peter and to a Gentile named Cornelius, a Roman centurion in a pair of visions that bring the two men together from their very different contexts.

For Cornelius, a devout, praying and alms-giving man in Caesarea, the vision was an angel telling him to send his men to fetch Peter who is staying with a tanner, Simon, in Joppa. As the men are on their way, Peter goes to the roof to pray and falls into a trance. Three times he sees this vision:

the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. ¹²In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and

reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." ¹⁴But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." ¹⁵The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

As he puzzles over the vision's meaning, Cornelius' men arrive and the Spirit tells him, "Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them." He obeys even though it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile. He has figured out that his vision was God showing him that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.

This is a very hard change for Peter, the Rock, one who was a faithful observer of his Jewish laws. The Spirit's movement was likely one he didn't expect, maybe didn't welcome. And yet, he responded, and things were never the same again. Later, when he had to defend his actions before a council of the other apostles, he said, "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" Who was I that I could hinder God?

It seems to me that we give these stories of the beginnings of the church too little time and space – perhaps because this Holy Spirit makes us nervous – uncomfortable, doing things that we can't control.

But think how important this part of the message is – how the stories in *The Acts of the Apostles* show us first that Jesus made good on his promise to his disciples. Not leaving them alone and abandoned but sending the Holy Spirit to guide them as they carried out his Commission. He didn't equip them with a rule book or a road map. They didn't fully know what they were to do or where they were to go. Preaching the Gospel to the ends of the earth did not happen instantaneously. Their mission unfolded as they allowed themselves to be lead – or pushed or pulled by the Spirit – into unpredictable and sometimes disturbing situations often at considerable risk. Little-by-little, step-by-step they moved out from Jerusalem both geographically and across religious lines.

It is the "across religious lines" that provide the second important lesson for us today. These stories are not just relics of ancient times that have nothing to do with us. In those times, the religious lines were between the Jewish Law and the Gentiles, lines of scripture and tradition. We have lines now, too--our rules, our institutional structures, scripture. But the same Spirit is alive in our world today--harder to see and hear, perhaps, blocked by centuries of tradition that developed after the apostolic age, and attempts to defend particular divisions and points of view.

An example from just this past week: the social media has been blazing with outraged response to a story about a baptism that didn't happen. It had been scheduled at an Episcopal cathedral in Florida for the third Sunday of Easter. Three days before that day, it was postponed – or cancelled. Who caused the cancellation was not entirely clear, but the reasons were, well, if not transparent, fairly obvious.

You see, the little boy who was to be baptized had two parents. But they were both fathers. These fathers had been part of the cathedral congregation for some time. They had spoken with the dean and attended the required pre-baptism sessions. The dean had advised them to have the baptism at the 6 pm service because the folks who came to that one “were more open.” When the unexpected cancellation happened, one of the dads posted a statement about his shock and disappointment. This was followed by finger pointing—was the dean responsible or was it the bishop? Was the date set or just tentative? The post went viral, at least in the Episcopal community, and got picked up by *The Washington Post*. A call went out for signatures on a petition to the bishop. Within 24 hours, the hoped-for 15,000 was exceeded.

The bishop then announced that there would be a meeting with the dads to straighten out the “misunderstanding.”

In the meantime, however, on May 7, an organization called Anglican Communion Institute, Inc., published a statement on Same Sex Marriage and Infant Baptism and fanned the blaze. They began with the assumption that a same sex relationship is sinful. Therefore, if two gay parents answer the baptismal question, “Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?” in the affirmative, “they and the officiant are publicly proclaiming that the teaching of the church does not consider their relationship sinful.” And further, if [the teaching of The Episcopal Church on this issue] “is the same as that of the church throughout the centuries and of the overwhelming majority of Christians today, these parents in irregular relationships cannot give the appropriate assurance and the infant should not be baptized.”

At this point, the bishop has met with the dads and there will be a baptism. The bishop has offered to be the officiant. The dads say that they will continue to be part of the cathedral community. I have not seen any further commentary from the ACI.

In these weeks before the Supreme Court gives its decision on Marriage Equality, I’m sure everyone is on edge. There is a great deal at stake and those who insist that they are following the “true faith” are feeling threatened and circling the wagons. There is, in fact, an organization now that is attempting to restrain the Justices and is erecting billboards in Michigan insisting that homosexuality is a choice and not a civil right. Scriptural sources are quoted.

Here is what I am wondering. Why do we not go back to the apostolic community for guidance on how and when change is needed? Why do so many insist on the myth of an unchanging “church throughout the centuries?”

Philip and Peter—indeed, many other apostles and disciples—learned first from Jesus and then from the Holy Spirit that the Law was for the people, not the people for the Law. The obstacles they needed to cross were in the very same scripture as many of the so-called “clobber passages” about sexuality. And yet, they were able to discern when to set them

aside. When to extend life, love, and baptism to all people. Even to violate these laws in favor of the greater commandment that Jesus gave in his last days, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you....You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

Are we not all chosen to love, to go, and to bear fruit? Is the Spirit not with us – alive right here? Ready to move within us to take us beyond ourselves and those places of habit and tradition where it is so easy to get stuck? What if everyone of us came into this place on Sunday mornings not with the idea of getting something – a spiritual lift, a moment of comfort, an empty spot filled. What if we came, instead, with wonder and openness. What if we came ready to love and be loved? To be changed and moved toward including everyone? With an expectation that we will be in God’s presence. That God is here and the Spirit breathes?

On this day that we celebrate our mothers and the nurturing and mothering given by diverse peoples – friends and family, let us pray:

On this Mother’s Day, we gather as your people to remember and give thanks for all mothers and for the divine gift of motherhood in all its diverse forms. Let us pray for all the mothers among us today; for our own mothers, those living and those who have passed away; for the mothers who loved us and for those who fell short of loving us fully; for all who hope to be mothers some day and for those whose hope to have children has been frustrated; for all mothers who have lost children; for all women and men who have mothered others in any way – those who have been our substitute mothers and we who have done so for those in need; for the earth that bore us and provides our sustenance.

O God of love and justice, we ask you to provide comfort and relief for mothers who worry their children will be caught in the line of gunfire; who fear their children will become victims of police brutality or gang violence; who worry about their children serving as police officers or in the military; who send their sons and daughters on international journeys to escape violence in their native lands; who lament their children trapped in inadequate schools and the criminal justice system; who mourn children lost to violence and war and who yearn for a better life. Bless all mothers’ children. We pray this all in the name of God, our great and loving Mother. Amen.