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5th Sunday of Easter

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Even on Them”

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Acts 10:44-48

44 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.

Even on Them

Our scripture reading today from the book of Acts comes at the end of a dramatic series of events. So before I read it, let me offer a little backstory. At the beginning of Acts chapter 10, we meet Cornelius, a devout and prayerful Gentile a non-Jew. Cornelius has a vision in which an angel tells him to send some of his men to find a man called Peter and bring him to Cornelius.

Meanwhile, Peter the primary leader of the new Jesus movement is having a vision of his own. He is waiting for lunch, and while he's waiting, he sees the heavens open and a big sheet floating down, filled with all kinds of animals that faithful Jews are not permitted to eat.

Then Peter hears a voice say that whatever God has made is not to be considered unclean. This is when Cornelius's men show up at Peter's door and persuade him to come with them.

Once they arrive at Cornelius's house, Peter enters and starts preaching the gospel, telling these Gentiles about Jesus. But then something happens that surprises everyone, which is where we pick up the story.

Hear now a reading from Acts chapter 10, verses 44 through 48.

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. 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, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

Franklin Roosevelt was elected president in 1932 when our country was in the midst of the Great Depression. Not long after the inauguration, a friend came to see FDR in the oval office and said,

"Mr. President, if you succeed in solving the crisis of the Great Depression, you will go down [in history] as our greatest president. But if you fail, sir, you will go down as our worst." FDR looked at him and responded, "If I fail, I'll be the last."¹

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2018/05/01/607303543/has-the-partisan-divide-ever-been-this-bad-author-jon-meacham-says-yes>

There are moments in the life of every organism and every organization from people to families to churches to countries when the stakes are so high and the challenges so significant that survival itself is on the line. Sometimes we are lucky enough to recognize these moments to be aware, as Roosevelt was, of just how serious the situation is. Other times, we only realize in retrospect just how close we came to losing everything.

When we read these stories in Acts about the formation of the early church, it's obvious to us just how close this movement came to never getting off the ground, much less to becoming a religion that would shape the world. But those who were there, those first Jesus followers, probably had no idea the weight of the decisions they were making: Whether to stay behind locked doors or go out among God's people whether to share the gospel with Jews only or also with non-Jews whether following Jesus was more important than following the rules of the Jewish tradition.

Although the answers to these questions may seem obvious to us now, for those first Jesus followers, there was nothing easy or obvious about these decisions at all.

This was especially true for Peter, who was not just an apostle ,but the disciple who always had the answer and who Jesus himself said would lead the church. From the very beginning of Acts, Peter shows himself to be a gifted preacher and a wise and discerning leader. It is Peter who recognizes that it is the Holy Spirit causing the chaos of the first Pentecost; it is Peter who speaks on behalf of the other disciples; it is Peter who believes enough in the power of God working through him that he cures the sick and even raises someone from the dead.²

In today's story, we discover that Peter also has a gift for what we now call adaptive leadership – leadership that responds to emerging challenges that have no clear-cut solutions. As much as the events of this particular day must have shocked him first, the vision that overturns centuries-old food laws and then the invitation to enter the home of a Gentile – as shocking as all this must have been, Peter nonetheless steps forward into an unknown future.

² In this point and what follows about Peter's leadership gifts, I am indebted to Pen Perry's sermon, "The Holy Spirit as a Pre-Existing Condition," Day1.org, May 13, 2012. http://day1.org/3820-the_holy_spirit_as_a_preexisting_condition/comments

Peter going to Cornelius's house may not sound like such a big deal to us, but this is among the most significant [encounters] in all of the Acts. Since Jews and Gentile didn't interact socially, it would have been perfectly acceptable even preferable for Peter to say to those men,

I'm sorry, no, I can't go with you today.

There have been too many new things already,

too many changes to the status quo,

and the laws and traditions of me interacting with you are pretty clear!

Instead, Peter says yes, and enters the home of a Gentile to share the good news of God's love revealed in Jesus, extending that love to a whole new group of people. Peter says yes before he knows how it will turn out or what it will mean.

In just a few minutes, some of you are going to come to the front to be ordained and installed as our newest leaders. And you don't have to spend much time in this church to know that we have a lot of folks around here who can relate to Peter. By and large, we are people who want to do the right thing and have the correct answer. We want to know what the rules are and we want to follow them and make sure others follow them too. We appreciate order and structure and clearly defined responsibilities.

Which means that, like Peter, all of us, at one point or another in the course of leading the church, are going to come up against some questions that challenge our most basic assumptions and defy easy answers:

Will the church be able to maintain a place of relevance in our culture? Who will want to be a part of our community and will we be open to including them? How can we bridge the differences between generations in a way that honors our past and moves us into the future?

Well, if leadership were easy, there wouldn't be a whole industry devoted to it, with books and videos and coaches and consultants, most of which promise to take complicated issues and boil them down into tools that if followed, will produce the desired result, whether they are seven effective habits or four quadrants of productivity or five dysfunctions of a team.

And until Acts chapter 10, we could be forgiven for thinking that leadership in the church isn't all that different from leadership in any other organization. Until Acts chapter 10, we could be forgiven for thinking that it is Peter who made the church the church or for assuming that it is us who must make sure the church stays the church.

But Acts chapter 10 makes clear that the church didn't become the church because of Peter or Paul or any of the other apostles. The church also didn't become the church because of non-Jews who insisted that God's promises and God's love were for them too. What made the church the church what makes the church the church is the Holy Spirit.

When Peter starts preaching to Cornelius and his household, the Holy Spirit cuts him off. For the first time in Acts, the Holy Spirit shows up and pours itself out on Gentiles, a whole new set of people, not when they are baptized or after they are baptized, but before they are baptized.

Which is why Peter asks the rhetorical question, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit? Clearly, the answer is no. Any human decision about whether or not these non-Jews can legitimately be baptized now is clearly beyond the point.

It at this moment that we realize that Peter is not the main character in the Book of Acts. No human being is. The main character of Acts, the primary leader of the church then and now is God the Holy Spirit. Which means this movement is not about us our words, our wisdom, our abilities it's about God's Word Jesus and God's wisdom Spirit and God's ability to move us beyond our limited vision of who God is and who we are called to be as God's church.

I hope it is a comfort to you God knows it is a comfort to me that it is when Peter is doing what Peter does best preaching that the Holy Spirit cuts him off, making very clear that this movement is about so much more than whoever is the leader of any church.

And I hope it is a comfort to you God knows it is a comfort to me that leadership in the church is not about having the answers or following the rules. Leadership in the church is about letting go of our assumptions and agendas and allowing the Spirit of God to move, to disturb, to pour out even on the last people we would ever expect God to choose as leaders. Even on us.

When she was in seminary, a beloved pastor told Barbara Brown Taylor that “being ordained is not about serving God perfectly but about serving God visibly, allowing other people to learn whatever they can from watching you rise and fall. You probably won’t be much worse than people,

” he said to her,

“and you certainly won’t be any better,

but you will have to let people look at you.

You will have to let them see you as you are.”³

It’s not one of the ordination questions that our new leaders will be asked today, but if I could add one question to the list, it would be this:

“Will you let people see you, even especially

when you don't have the answer, or you've made a mistake,

even especially when you’re afraid and uncertain,

even especially when you feel

the Spirit moving you

in a direction, you'd rather not go?”

It’s so tempting for us to make leadership in the church is about our talents and abilities and knowledge. It's tempting but wrong; because the only job of our leaders is to be followers. In the church, leaders must follow the unpredictable, erratic, and at times downright shocking movement of the Spirit, which is, after all, the presence of God here and now, within us and among us. And we can pretty much guarantee that the Spirit will push and prod and pull us to go places we never imagined we would go, even places we don’t want to go.

While that may sound much harder than following a rule book, the good news is that when we are willing to follow, the Spirit will lead us into a future we could never predict but where we will experience the boundary-breaking, custom-defying, all-encompassing love of God. Amen.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church*, HarperOne, 2006, p. 37.