

May 6, 2018  
Acts 10:39-48  
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## **“All Who Believe”**

**Good morning! Last week I suggested a question which we can ask any time we’re reading or studying the book of Acts. I know you hang on every word of my sermons and remember them for weeks, but for those of you who weren’t here last week, I’ll repeat the question: “what is the Holy Spirit up to?” I didn’t really answer that question last Sunday, but our text today gives us some additional glimpses of what the Holy Spirit is up to. As you know, the book of Acts is Volume 2 of the collection written by Luke: Volume 1 is the gospel of Luke, and the full name of Volume 2 is the Acts of the Apostles. In my humble opinion it should actually be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit, because that is what it’s all about.**

**So to review some of what the Holy Spirit has been up to, in chapter 9 an angel of the Lord sent Philip the Evangelist out on a deserted road in Gaza, where Philip met an Ethiopian eunuch, preached Jesus to him, and at the eunuch’s request, despite what Philip Jewish law says about men who have permanent damage done to their reproductive organs, Philip baptizes the eunuch. Philip is taken away by the Holy Spirit, and the eunuch goes on his way rejoicing.**

**Acts 10 is another narrative that we join halfway through -- or maybe  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way through. The main human characters in this story are the apostle Peter -- yep, *that* Peter -- the fisherman we met in gospel, who was an enthusiastic and occasionally misguided disciple of Jesus. After a spectacular preaching debut in Acts 2, Peter is at it again, healing and preaching. The other character we meet in Acts 10 is Cornelius. He’s a Roman centurion, a ranking officer with command of 100 soldiers, and Luke tells us “a thoroughly good man.” This is not how Roman soldiers are typically described, but Cornelius, despite the fact that he isn’t Jewish, is a believer in God**

who helps people in need and prays regularly. An angel of God appears to Cornelius (a non-Jew, What is the Holy Spirit up to?) and tells Cornelius to send a couple men to go get Simon Peter from Joppa and bring him to Cornelius' house in Caesarea. While those men are on their way to get Peter, Peter goes out on his balcony to pray and has a vision of a huge blanket lowered down from the sky filled with every kind of animal, reptile and bird imaginable. And a voice says, "Go ahead Peter, kill and eat." And possibly because this is weirdest picnic Peter has ever seen, and certainly because some of these animals are forbidden by Jewish dietary laws, Peter says, "Oh no, I couldn't. I always eat kosher." This happens two more times, the vision disappears, and then three Roman guys show up downstairs asking for Peter. Simon Peter. Up on the balcony, the Spirit whispers to Peter, "There are three guys downstairs looking for you. Go downstairs and go with them and don't ask any questions. I sent them to get you."

So Peter and Cornelius meet at Cornelius' house. Cornelius introduces Peter to his household, and Peter says, (I'm paraphrasing) "I gotta tell you, this is pretty weird for me. Jews don't usually hang out with non-Jews. Now I'm not prejudiced, but you're a different race than I am, and you eat unclean food and all. Normally I wouldn't do this fraternizing thing, but I had the strangest vision just before your guys showed up. So I'd really like to know why you brought me here." And Cornelius says, "Whoa, you too? I was praying a couple days ago, and this angel said 'Go get Simon Peter,' so I sent for you and here you are. We're all gathered here in God's presence, we're ready to listen to whatever you have to tell us."

Well, that is an irresistible invitation for a preacher. Peter starts to preach that God doesn't play favorites. Whoever you are and whenever you're from -- if you want God and are ready to do what God says, the door is open. Through Jesus Christ, everything is being put together again. And Peter begins to tell them about Jesus of Nazareth, that he was anointed by the Holy Spirit for a ministry of teaching and healing.

And we join the story (finally!) in verse 39 while Peter is telling Cornelius and friends about Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, and the witness of the holy writings and the witness of the believers. And

then a surprising thing happens -- the Holy Spirit interrupts Peter right in the middle of his awesome sermon. Whatever the Holy Spirit is up to, the Spirit doesn't seem to have a lot of respect for preachers: even really good preachers. I mean, Peter was on a roll here; OK he stumbled a bit at the beginning with the whole "I'm not sure I belong here" opening, but made a good recovery and established rapport with his listeners through that amazing "Whaaat . . . that angel talked to you too?" thing with Cornelius. They were all ears and here the Spirit is interrupts the sermon. This isn't the first or the last time this happens: in Acts 2, here in Acts 10, Acts 17, Acts 22, Acts 23 and Acts 26, the Spirit comes upon listeners when somebody else is speaking. Seriously? What is the Holy Spirit up to?

It is pretty clear that the Spirit does not have a lot of respect for human boundaries. After all, it was the Spirit who orchestrated this whole meeting of the Odd Couple-- Peter and Cornelius--in the first place. Back in chapter 2, on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit came upon faithful Jews from all over the known world. Here in chapter 10 we have a second Pentecost -- the Spirit falls upon faithful non-Jews, and they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and believe in Jesus Christ. And the Jews who came with Peter cannot believe it.

Funny thing, isn't it, how the power of the Spirit and believing in Jesus Christ can change things we thought we knew. Peter had spent his life following laws about food which were clean and unclean and Jewish purification rituals which kept him separate from non-Jews. And then he has a vision where God tells him that eating what was once forbidden is OK and that he should go meet this Roman centurion. I believe that the Spirit is up to a number of things in this story. More importantly, I believe that the Spirit is up to something in our congregation and in our lives. Here are a few things to consider:

First, I believe that God doesn't play favorites. The NRSV says, "God shows no partiality." Any person from any nation who fears God and does what is right has access to God through Jesus Christ. Christ is the "get home free" card, but only for those who accept that Jesus is Lord.

Second, I believe that the Spirit doesn't have much respect for human boundaries. Nation, race, gender, religious background, slave, free,

young, old, poor, disabled -- whatever ways we've come up with to support what we believe about groups people who are different than us so that we don't actually have to get to know them -- the Holy Spirit doesn't have much use for those categories. The Spirit persistently appears in places we don't expect and takes us to places where we may be reluctant to go.

And finally, talking to people is risky business. The chances are at least as good that they will change you as they are that you will change them. Peter is a great example: here he is, preaching a fine sermon, and the Holy Spirit shows up and changes everything. These Gentiles start speaking in tongues and praising God. They received the Spirit just like the Jews. Is there any reason they shouldn't be baptized? No! No reason at all! Except that they're a bunch of uncircumcised, reptile-eating Gentiles, completely outside of Jewish law. Like Philip in Acts chapter 9, Peter follows the leading of the Spirit, and baptizes them in the name of Jesus Christ.

And our story ends with a little phrase that I want to be sure we don't skip over, because it's important. Acts 10:48 says, "Then they asked Peter to stay on for a few days." The assumption is that Peter said Yes, and stayed with them. This is significant -- not only does Peter cross this racial, religious, ritual boundary to be with Cornelius, Peter stays with them for a few days. This has been a conversion experience for *Peter*; he has not only come to believe that Gentiles can experience the Holy Spirit just like Jews, and should be baptized, but he has enough humility to accept their hospitality. He has not merely preached at them, he is willing to stay with them. Peter not only ministered *to* them, he is in ministry *with* them.

God for all people through Christ Jesus; crossing boundaries; taking the risk to get to know people who are different than us; ministry with our neighbors -- brother and sisters, these are some of the things that the Spirit is up to. You're going to be hearing more about this from me and from other people in the coming months. Maybe even in our meeting following worship today.