

Sixth Sunday of Easter – Year B

I don't know if you've noticed – but most of the time our first reading on Sundays is from the Hebrew Scriptures – or the Old Testament. Then we have a reading from one of the letters or *epistles* in the New Testament – and then a reading from one of the Gospels. But during the Easter Season – during these weeks following the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus – our Lectionary gives us as our *first* reading a passage from the Acts of the Apostles. There is good reason for that. I said last week that the book of Acts chronicles the Spirit empowering the disciples to be witnesses – and describes what happens in that process. But I think perhaps it is also the story of the early church – those first followers of Jesus – being stretched into something that – to use the words of our opening collect – surpassed their understanding – and exceeded their desires. These readings from Acts each week during the Easter season are here to tell us what the impact is – what God is doing – when we allow that Holy Spirit of God to lead us in our efforts to be church.

Last week, we heard of Philip responding to the promptings of the Spirit to “get up and go” – meeting the Ethiopian eunuch – realizing that God was inviting into the family someone that the law had previously said was not fit to worship in the assembly. We heard the eunuch say, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

In this morning's reading from Acts, we heard almost those same words coming out of the mouth of Peter. The circumstances are different, but the underlying message is the same: God is including *everyone* in the family – *we all belong* – and yes, I said that last week, but it's still true: *we all belong* – even those we least expect to belong.

Once again, though, we need to hear what has happened just prior to our reading for today, what happened in the episode that got skipped over. So, “previously in the Acts of the Apostles”...

There was a Centurion – a Roman military man – named Cornelius who lived in Caesarea – which was a Roman and Gentile city. Cornelius is described as a devout man who prayed constantly and gave alms – all part of the practice of good Jews, by the way, done by this Gentile. Cornelius had a vision of an angel who clearly told him to send for a certain Simon who was called Peter, and who was staying in Joppa at the house of another Simon who was a *tanner*. –

Why all the detail? Because the fact that Peter was staying in the house of a *tanner* was important. Tanning the hides of animals was not prohibited by Jewish law, but tanners necessarily came into contact with dead animals, and used urine and other waste to tan the hides. They were thus often ritually unclean – and they smelled. Their clothes smelled, the house – probably close to the tannery – would have smelled. So that was where Cornelius sent two of his slaves and one of his soldiers to fetch Peter the next day. Meanwhile, back in Joppa, Peter was indeed staying at the house of Simon the tanner. At the time the slaves and soldier were on their way to him, Peter was up on the roof praying – and then got hungry. And while he was waiting for his lunch to be prepared, he fell into a trance – or took a cat nap. And *he* had a vision – a vision of a large white sheet being lowered by its four corners – calling to mind the four corners of the world, perhaps? And it was full of all kinds of four-footed animals and reptiles and birds of prey – in other words, full of things considered unclean for Jews to eat. And a voice said to him, “Peter, get up. Kill and eat!” but Peter refused, saying, “By no means, Lord! Never have I eaten anything that was unclean or profane.” And God’s voice said in return, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” This happened three times before “the thing” was suddenly taken back up into heaven.

Now while Peter was puzzling over what this meant, the three men sent from Cornelius arrived. Peter was still wrestling in his mind over the vision, when the Holy Spirit told him that God had sent these three men and Peter should go with them. So Peter went down and met them, they told their story, and Peter invited them to spend the night – in the tanner’s house, remember – and then they set out the next morning from Joppa to Caesarea – “they” being Peter and some of the Jewish believers from Joppa.

When they got to Cornelius, Peter made a point of reminding everyone that good Jews were not supposed to associate with Gentiles – not engage with them, let alone eat with or go into their homes; it was unlawful. But Peter adds that – because of his vision of those unclean things that God said were *not* profane – he has come to see that he should not call *anyone* unclean or profane. God shows no partiality. Peter then launches into quite the sermon, to tell Cornelius and all his household the good news of Jesus – and “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.” Those are the first words of our passage from this morning. Can you see why we needed to hear the first part of the story?

The importance is not just that the Holy Spirit fell on those who heard the word – the importance is how that all came about. Here was Cornelius - a Roman and a Gentile – but one who had space in his life for God. And the Holy Spirit *works* with that open heart –

and with Peter's simultaneous willingness to step outside the boundaries of the traditions and rules he had grown up with – to bring those two together – Jew and Gentile – into a greater understanding of the immensity of God's outreaching arms.

And in case we missed that the Spirit is the one directing everything here, the Spirit falls on these Gentiles *out of order!* The *correct* order is hearing the good news, being baptized, *then* receiving the Holy Spirit. But God's spirit will not be deterred or deferred. God's desire to bring us all into one is stronger than the gates we erect to separate those included from those not. In an echo of the question from the Ethiopian eunuch, Peter asks, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" In light of the Holy Spirit coming to dwell in these folks, can anyone say they cannot belong?

It's important to recognize here that no dogmatic confession is required. Cornelius and his household don't have to sign forms - or conform to certain ways of doing things. Peter has already come to realize that – in seeing that the forbidden foods are not forbidden by *God...* in recognizing that Simon the tanner may be considered unclean by some but is *not* seen as unclean by God... And now Peter is led deeper into the realization that in God – in this God who took flesh in Jesus – *we all belong.*

There is one final message in our passage from Acts this morning – in the very last line, which can seem so much like a throw-away line that we might miss its importance. We are told: "Then they invited him to stay for several days."

We need to think about that. Imagine Peter and the other believers with him staying in the house of this Roman Centurion – Gentile, not Jew, although now a believer in Jesus. What might their first meal have been like? In Luke's gospel, Jesus has already told the disciples when he sent them out that when they are offered hospitality in someone's home, they should eat whatever is provided. But the food would not have been kosher...not even foods with which they were familiar, perhaps. They would not have known the "customs" of that Roman Centurion's household...

What we have here, I believe, is a lesson in hospitality – or in reversing the direction of hospitality, perhaps. What Peter – and the church – is called to here is to accept the hospitality of others.

One commentator put it this way:

“The Church’s mission is not that we should be hospitable to others but that we learn to be guests who rely on the hospitality of others, crossing our cultural boundaries into someone else’s space – not imposing our cultural norms, but eating other people’s foods, listening to their music, entering their homes.”ⁱ

When Sr. Linda-Susan and I first came to the parish in Edmore, folks often invited us to their homes for a meal – and there *were* times we didn’t really feel like going! But what we came to realize was that our community charism of hospitality was not just about welcoming people to Emmaus, but allowing others to welcome us into *their* space – to hear their stories, to *honor* their stories, to share the bread *they* ate, to learn to be at home in *their* home.

As someone said this past Wednesday at Church School, “This is a story of barriers being broken down – and when barriers are removed, what can happen.” When we can let go of our notions of what is required to be “acceptable” – when we can acknowledge that God’s embrace is all-encompassing – when we can step outside boundaries – then the Spirit will do great things – things that will surpass our understanding, and exceed all our desires.

“O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

- [Acts 10:44-48](#) [1 John 5:1-6](#) [John 15:9-17](#) [Psalm 98](#)

ⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/783-sixth-sunday-of-easter-may-9-2021>