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Trinity Episcopal Church

Acts 10: 44 – 48
1 John 5: 1 – 6

Ps. 98
John 15: 9 – 17

During the season of Easter, our first lesson each Sunday has been coming from the Book of Acts rather than from the Hebrew Scriptures. And in these readings, we are given glimpses of life in the very early church. We see the Church in perhaps its most idealized, most perfect form – devoid of buildings and vestments and clergy and rituals. What we see is the Church, simply a gathering of the people who follow Jesus, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. A power that uses the preached word of God to heal and bless and transform lives, that enables the lost to be found, that emboldens the faint-hearted to hope and to act, that turns death into life.

But, as seems to be the case with human nature, the question arises: for whom are the gifts of the Holy Spirit intended? Are they for a select, chosen few? Or are they for anyone and everyone who will receive them? And maybe even for those who refuse them? And how are these gifts to be apportioned? And who gets to make the decision about how they are apportioned? Even though Peter's preaching pretty much obliterates any line we want to draw between "us" and "them," it is a challenge that the Church has encountered over and over in the centuries that have followed. We have not yet learned that our thoughts are not God's thoughts nor our ways God's ways. We have not yet learned that there is no "us" and "them" from God's perspective.

The Israelites had been given the gift of the law through Moses which was intended not as some sort of test that would be graded at the end of one's life, but as a framework for living one's life with God. A loving God who desires nothing less than the best for the people of God. Jesus' commandment to 'love one another as I have first loved you' is given in the same spirit. Jesus does NOT say, "Love one another or else." Instead, Jesus models what loving one another means. For Jesus, to love is to *be* for one another, to *act* for one another, even at a cost to oneself. To love one another is to offer one's self with humility, vulnerability, respect and joy. To love one another is to serve one another. For Jesus, love is an action verb, not an emotion. In order to live into Jesus' commandments, Jesus' followers have to *do* something.

In the Book of Acts, as life in the early Church unfolds, we are given story after story about how the earliest Christians are trying to live into Jesus' commandment to love one another. And they are having a hard time of it. Time after time, the first Christians are challenged by the Holy Spirit to broaden their boundaries, to erase the lines that divide, to welcome the stranger and the alien. They are challenged time and again to share God's love with surprising people. Apparently, when Jesus commands them to love one another, Jesus means everyone: Ethiopian eunuchs, Greeks, women and even the Roman oppressors.

Today's story from Acts is the tail end of Peter's encounter with the Roman centurion, Cornelius. It's probably a familiar story. Peter had been called to the town of Joppa to heal someone. He has stayed on there as a house guest for some period of time. One day, about midday, Peter is up on the rooftop praying [flat roofs as an extension of the home]. He has a very odd vision. Something like a big picnic blanket suspended by ropes is lowered from the heavens. And on that blanket are all manner of four-footed creatures, reptiles and birds of the air. A voice says, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat!" Peter's response is "No, I can't possibly do that. It's not kosher! I've never eaten anything profane or unclean!"

The voice responds, “What God has made clean, you must not call unclean!” This happens three times. Peter finally gets the point.

Now, it just so happens, that God has also called upon this Roman centurion in Caesarea by the name of Cornelius. Cornelius is described as a God-fearing man, which is an interesting descriptor for a Roman soldier. And Cornelius also has a vision while he is praying. He is supposed to send some of his troops to Joppa to find Peter and bring him back, so he does. Peter’s vision, telling him not to call unclean what God calls clean, prepares Peter to accept Cornelius’ invitation and Peter ends up in Caesarea. It’s hard for us to appreciate just what a challenge this must be for Peter. To go into the home of a Gentile – and a Roman centurion at that – must feel downright wrong and stomach-churning to Peter. Everything about his upbringing and his culture argues against it. But he does it.

Peter goes to Cornelius and no sooner does he open his mouth and begin to tell the Romans about Jesus, then the Holy Spirit just up and comes over Cornelius and his entire household. Luke writes that the circumcised believers [meaning the other Jews who are accompanying Peter] ... are astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit is poured out EVEN on the Gentiles.” Oh, my heavens! Say it isn’t so! Even the *Gentiles*. OMG. Literally.

Peter is forced to realize that though he thought HE was making the big concession and deigning to come into Cornelius’ house, and though he thought that HE was bringing the Good News to this household like some commodity to be apportioned or a gift he was offering, and though he thought that somehow HE had the upper hand, God’s Spirit just bypasses all of that and comes upon Cornelius and household in one fell swoop in some overwhelming and unmistakable way. Somehow, Peter and those with him have to come to terms with this experience of the Holy Spirit at work in people who are different - different in looks, in speech, in thinking and upbringing – than they are.

Two thousand years later, we, the Church, are still dealing with this challenge. Two thousand years later, we are still working at loving one another. It seems to be human nature to want to draw a circle around one’s self to define who’s in and who’s out. To try to set limits on who belongs and who doesn’t. However, it seems to be the nature of the Holy Spirit to push us out past our boundaries and borders and comfort zones, and to ask us to become somewhat more mature in our faith. We can be pretty certain that if we think we are being called to shrink our circle, to include fewer people, to be more selective – if we think that God likes all the same people we like and doesn’t like the ones we don’t like – then we are probably not listening to the voice of God. God’s dream for us, enfleshed in the life and ministry of Jesus, is all about expanding the table, making an effort to love people we don’t want to love, and – as one writer has put it – to accept with grace that *our* vision of God and of God’s Kingdom is necessarily myopic and limited.

What Peter discovers, and what the Church and we ourselves keep discovering, is that we do not have anything close to exclusive access to God’s Truth or God’s Spirit or God’s love. We all bring a piece of the puzzle to the table. And *we* are not the hosts at the table. God is. We are merely guests, like everyone else. We are not called to welcome others so much as we are called to act like we have been welcomed ourselves into the grace of God. We don’t forgive the sins of others, so much as we tell others how we have been forgiven and reconciled. As the saying goes, we are all beggars, hungry for the bread of God, telling others where that bread may be found.

“As the Father has loved me,” Jesus says, “so I love you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandment [to love one another], you will abide in my love...I have said these things so that my joy

may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” We don’t often think of “Love” and “commandment” in the same thought. But the language of ‘commandment’ lets us know just how important love is. Elsewhere in the Gospels, when asked what are the most important of the commandments, Jesus says loving God and loving neighbor as oneself. All the rest, he says, is commentary.

But along with commandment language, Jesus speaks of ‘abiding’ in God’s love. Abiding, dwelling in, to be at home in, God’s love. Like take your shoes off at the door and curl up in the big easy chair kind of abiding. Jesus, in fact, invites us into the love that he and his Father share: a completely full and free kind of interchange, an enveloping kind of love. Jesus invites us to love as he does – fully, freely, all-encompassingly, abundantly, engagingly, transformingly, enlargingly, and victoriously – not in its might but in its gentleness, mercy and steadfastness.

In the words of a writer from Forward Day by Day [2009], let us pray:

Abide in us, Lord Jesus, that we may abide in your love. Expand us, stretch us, fill us, breathe through us that we may admit more and more of you into ourselves, until no trace of not-you remains.

Until you abide in us, Lord, we remain shriveled and limp. Surround us with your love. We long for you, Lord; answer our longing. Sing through our voices, move through our hands. Make your thoughts our thoughts; yourself, ourselves. As you fill us, Lord, and we become who you are, we do not become less of who we each are, but more truly who you have created us to be, the people we long to be, but will never be able to be until we abide in your love.

Come, Lord Jesus. We are yours – claim what is your own. And then do with us as you will. We do not care where we go, as long as we go with you. We do not care what we do, as long as you work through us. We do not care what we have, for everything comes from you and all things are yours. We do not care where or how we finish our course in life, so long as we finish with you. Amen.

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