

**Acts 10:44-48 (NRSV)**

*Gentiles Receive the Holy Spirit*

<sup>44</sup> While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. <sup>45</sup> 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, <sup>46</sup> for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, <sup>47</sup> “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” <sup>48</sup> So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

## A Wide Net

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: *Acts 10:44-48*

This morning we have read but the middle of a story in the book of Acts. To get its point, though, we need to fill in the beginning and the end. Those who compose the readings for Sundays must have thought the whole story was too long to read, and they were probably right. But here's a short summary.

In Caesarea there was a soldier, a Roman Centurion, who was attracted to Judaism, whose name was Cornelius. Cornelius was among many we know of who practiced the Jewish faith, but who did not fully convert. In particular, they did not become circumcised. Circumcision was the sign and seal of being Jewish. One could no more be a Jew if refusing circumcision than a Christian if refusing baptism. Circumcision signified the final and complete submission to the faith. In the beginning all the Christians were also Jews. No one could become a Christian without first being a Jew. That is, no one could become a Christian without being circumcised. This may all sound silly to us, but it was a very serious issue in the early Christian church.

So, Cornelius, while sympathetic to Judaism, also did not fit in two rather significant ways. He was uncircumcised, and he was a Roman soldier, a soldier in the army that occupied Judea.

Now, one afternoon Cornelius had a vision from God, which told him to send men to Joppa and find there a certain Simon Peter and have this Peter brought to him. The next day, before Cornelius's party arrived, Peter, too, had a vision from God. In his vision Peter saw many animals which were not kosher descend on a blanket, and God commanded Peter to kill them and eat. Peter responded that he had never eaten anything that wasn't kosher, nor would he ever do it. God, however, boomed, "What God has called clean, you must not call profane."

Next, Cornelius's men arrive, and Peter returns to Caesarea with them. There Cornelius has gathered all his family and friends in preparation for Peter's arrival. Peter explains that ordinarily he couldn't associate with Cornelius's kind, but since God commanded to come, he did so without hesitation. A pretty rude way to greet one's host, but, after all, we are talking about Peter, who we know from the Gospels isn't the most socially adept person on earth.

Peter then preached the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Then we come to the part that we read. While Peter was speaking the Holy Spirit fell on all of Cornelius's people. The circumcised who had come with Peter were astonished that the Holy Spirit had fallen on the uncircumcised, but they could not deny it. Cornelius's people showed all the signs of the Spirit. Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" And he ordered them baptized.

But the story isn't over. Word of these events preceded Peter to the home-base of the church in Jerusalem. The people there were not happy. "So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat

with them?” Peter explained the situation to them, and they relented. However, we know from later chapters in Acts and from Paul’s letters that this issue of baptizing the uncircumcised, that is, this issue of including those whom the faithful judged as unclean and unacceptable, did not go away easily in the early church. And can we say that it has yet gone away in our day? Can we say that Christianity, or other religious faiths for that matter, have ridded themselves of attitudes that consider some people to be unclean, unacceptable or unworthy? This fight over circumcision is a good one for us to consider, for that particular issue seems silly to us today as a basis for rejection. I may be wrong, but I daresay that none of us in the church worries about who of us is circumcised. Since the issue has little emotional content for us, we can then more easily focus on the issues that were below the surface, but which were more important and are more universal.

From the beginning the idea of a chosen people was a double-edged sword. When God made the covenant with Abraham, God planted the seed of hope in what the Bible calls “a wandering Aramean,” a nomad who had neither land nor numbers. It was a moment of great liberation and possibility for the wanderer, who could now picture descendants numbered as the stars in the sky and a land flowing with milk and honey. But as the record tells us, whenever the promises came close, whenever the people Israel established themselves, the writers and the prophets had to remind them over and over again that they were once sojourners, and that they should welcome the wanderer and the stranger. The temptation was to turn being chosen from promise into barricade, from hope into protectiveness, from celebration into fear. Ancient Israel struggled constantly with losing her soul to maintain her identity.

This struggle was always there, but it may have become more obvious at the birth of the Christian church. For, like the rib of Adam, the Christian church was born from the flesh of Judaism. It found itself, then, in a double strain. On the one hand, issues of identity and distinctiveness were forced to the foreground. What were to be the differences between Jews and Christians? Would the differences allow them to still be one religion? And if they couldn’t stay as one religion, what was their relationship to be like? On the other hand, the old issues of openness and acceptance took on a new twist. To include others in Christianity, must they be also be “clean” by Jewish lights? And how did that question cut against the radical openness that Peter experienced in that vision when God said, “How dare you call profane that which I have called clean?” In one sense, one could describe the history of the Christian church as the history of trying to decide that question: who is in, and who is out?

I suspect that most of us so certainly assume that there must be an answer to that question that we may not even see the necessity of asking whether the question is the right question at all. It just may be that we are so naturally inclined to think that there must be some who are excluded if there are those who are chosen, that we fail to ask, is that right?

The blanket that God showed Peter in his vision contained every animal that could conceivably be used as food. It wasn’t just a new list of the clean. God didn’t say, “Hey, Peter, here are some animals that are okay that you missed.” God didn’t say, “Hey, Peter, you need to update your kosher food database.” God said here is every conceivable creature in creation and I don’t want you to call any of them profane.

Our God is Still Speaking campaign says, “Don’t put a period where God has put a comma.” We might also say it, “Don’t put a wall where God has put open space; don’t put a boundary where God has prescribed brother and sisterhood; don’t divine a club where God

means to establish a community; don't divide where God wants to connect; do not cleave what God seeks to unite.

The great twentieth-century Jewish theologian said that Judaism is a religion of time not of space. When religion is seen to be about time, it implies our living together day in and day out. When religion is seen to be about space it quickly degenerates into ownership and boundaries, who is in and who is out. And this mechanism of dividing those who are in from those who are out has a deeper inflection than we may readily see. James Alison says that "every local culture builds its frontiers by means of victims." (*Raising Abel*) That is, when we place a wall between us, we necessarily dehumanize and ascribe qualities to those on the other side of it that justify the wall in the first place.

The rhetoric over immigration in our country today is an example. We justify a wall on the Mexican border to protect ourselves from those on the other side. And how are they described, those on the other side? They are illegal aliens. They are job-takers. They are a drain on the economy. They are overrunning the country. They are criminals. Described that way, the fence is easy to justify. But what if they were described as Juan and Carmelita working hard to feed their children? What if they were described as Pedro and Rosa who love each other and want to make a start in life, maybe get an education, and make something of themselves. What if they are described as parents and grandparents and children who care for each other like other families do and who want a chance? What if God insists, "Do not call profane members of the human family, whom I have created, and whom I call acceptable? Doesn't justification of the fence seem less high-minded?"

In the debate around human sexuality one could ask a similar set of questions. The fence is easy to justify between those whom we say God loves and those whom we say God hates or considers an abomination. But when we say they are people with jobs and worries, hopes and hurts, loves and cares; when we say they are people whom God created and loves, then the fence looks insidious and mean-spirited.

Peter and the other early Christians found themselves in a curious situation. They, like most humans, were inclined to always divide between the acceptable and the unacceptable. But they told a story that betrayed them. Peter told Cornelius the story of Jesus. Peter told Cornelius the story of a God who shows no partiality. He told him the story of Jesus of Nazareth who did good and healed the oppressed. He told him of Jesus' ministry throughout Judea and in Jerusalem. And he told him how, for his troubles, they hung him on a tree. That is, Peter told Cornelius that they punished Jesus for siding with those whom they had rejected. And he told him how, nonetheless, Jesus overcame their punishment and was resurrected.

It would be hard to miss the point of the story that Peter told Cornelius. God means to cast the net of acceptability far wider than we are generally inclined to do. So resistant to that idea are we that we crucified the one who brings that message. And even in a religion that carries Jesus' name, too many too often distort his message to divide the world into acceptable and unacceptable. The message of Jesus does not rest easily in our pre-existing prejudices, however. For its meaning is clear enough to those who will listen. The net is cast wide. The need for there to be an outsider to define ourselves against has evaporated. The stories invite us away from the old practices of death. In this sense we are born again, born into a whole new way of seeing the world, a whole new way of being with one another. In this world there is no East or West, North or South, just one brotherhood and sisterhood of the whole wide earth.

Thanks be to God. Amen.