

Over the past few weeks, I have had the distinct opportunity to lead a bible study for a group of people that are connected to this church. It has been an incredibly interesting and soul fulfilling experience. The rhythm of our study is to read the assigned scripture for the upcoming Sunday and to discuss what sticks out from those readings. We call our Wednesday meeting, “Men’s Bible Study”... Yet in my mind, I call it... “what should I preach about.” I listen and learn, and my sermon hopefully reflects what is on your mind.

The way our practice works is that one person reads a lesson from the lectionary and then we just sort of... talk about it. It is simple. It is deep. And, today, I would like to include all of you in the weekly journey that our bible study group engages in.

During our conversation this week, it became apparent to me that it would be helpful to speak about our reading from the book of the Acts of the Apostles. In this book we see our Christian Church in its earliest, perhaps even most perfect and probably most idealized form.

Certainly the Apostles would have spoken in synagogues and town squares, but for our earliest leaders and believers there were often no buildings, doctrines, vestments, or rituals as we know them now; just the power of the Holy Spirit giving the preached Word of God the power to transform death into life, making the lost found, the captive free, the lame to walk, the blind to see, and giving the hopeless hope.

One of the questions from our bible study group regarding this part of scripture mirrored what many were surely asking at the time when Jesus' Apostles were spreading the Good News. "Who is the gift of the Holy Spirit intended for, is it for some certain people or is it for everyone?"

If you know me, I reckon you know my answer to that question... the Holy Spirit lives in and moves through all people, places, and things. So my answer was ... "yes". Yet, not everyone knows, feels, or understands it. So...how and to whom do we share the gift of the Holy Spirit?

In our bible study class, we talked at length about how different people, denominations, doctrines, etc. understand and encounter the gift of the Holy Spirit. “Who gets to be baptized, who gets to take communion, who gets to feel the love that God has for us and for all of God’s creation? My answer to such questions is and I reckon will always be “yes” ... and then go further.

When we are aware and recognize how fortunate we are to have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and then who are we to share that gift with? Some or all?

In our modern contexts, we are inundated with the concept of “us and them”, yet in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, we hear preaching from people like Peter, that explodes the myth of “We are us and they are them.” Scripture sings to us that there is no us and them, we are all loved.

The Apostles were helping people in their time understand that regardless of where you are from, what your position in life is, or what your cultural norms are, we are all one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord. What a wonderful message...

Our passage from Acts begins, “And while Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The 98th Psalm that we heard just a few moments ago is a great reminder of all the marvelous things that have happened in the tenth chapter of Acts. “Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things.” Let us think about all of those marvelous things....

At the beginning of the 10th chapter in Acts, we hear of Cornelius, a Roman soldier of rank, prestige, and honor. Cornelius is wealthy, he owns slaves, and may have gained all he had through pillage and plunder. He probably would have been... in his place and time, to the faithful and observant Jew, which includes Simon Peter,

a person of derision, maybe disgust, and probably would have been hated for participating in the oppression of Israel and the economic exploitation of the people to provide for the glories of Rome. So, I imagine that Peter would have been quite surprised when God makes it clear that Cornelius is loved by God, too, and there is nothing that Peter can do about it. In Christ there is no “us or them”... there is only we.

I think that context is important... Shortly before God arranges an introduction of Peter to Cornelius, God gives the well-meaning-yet-often-befuddled Peter a vision of a four-cornered sheet full of animals that would make Peter unclean if he even touched them, much less ate them. Peter may not follow the rules, but he certainly knows them. God essentially tells Peter that cultural and societal norms are less important than God’s love and work in the world. Peter, a Jewish, follower and believer of Jesus, understands what and who is “clean”. He is and Cornelius isn’t. Yet God tells Peter that God has made Cornelius, too, and it is not for Peter to call him profane. In God’s economy, the lost belong just as much to God as those that are found.

As the Acts of the Apostles makes abundantly clear, the ones who are being saved by Christ are not to stand still waiting for the lost to come to them. Peter has been sent to Cornelius, not the other way around.

Peter preaches a sermon that begins with these words of the new song, full of the marvelous things of Christ's resurrection. "I truly understand that God shows no partiality." It is during this sermon that the passage we heard today takes place: "While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.

Cornelius and his unclean cohorts receive the gospel message with abandon, like the people of Nineveh did when Jonah prophesied, and the Holy Spirit pours in and blows through their unclean lives just as surely as the Spirit does ours. The circumcised believers, were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.

Every time the verb astounded shows up in scripture, we should pay close attention, because chances are there is an example of God acting in our lives as God wants, not as we want God to act.

When the understanding of a Biblical passage turns on understanding the rite of circumcision, we are rightly uncomfortable to go into detail. Simply put, the circumcised believe they are clean and that the uncircumcised, like Cornelius and those named gentiles, are permanently unclean. We can see the tectonic shift underway; we can hear a new song being sung: What God has made no one shall deem unclean.

Peter finishes his sermon directed not at the ones being converted, but to the smug and certain who already think that their Christian faith and forgiveness by God makes them privileged over others. Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have

At the point of our reading, the Church is but a few days old, yet the congregants are already complaining among themselves, conspiring to send a letter to their equivalent of the bishop and standing committee, complaining that even the gentiles yes, the gentiles, can you believe such a thing? have accepted the word of God.

I wonder what thoughts or motivations make us sound the same?

We are not the hosts at God's table; we are guests ourselves. We aren't called to welcome as much as to act like we have been welcomed ourselves into the grace of God. We don't forgive the sins of others; we testify that our sins have been forgiven. We are all beggars hungry for the bread of God, telling the other beggars where the bread may be found.

Jesus made it all quite simple: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Too many Christians believe that we are called simply to believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and that when we achieve that belief, it somehow separates us from those who don't. We fall into the sin of believing that we are clean, and those who don't believe are unclean. But as the philosopher Kierkegaard observed, "Christianity is not a doctrine to be taught, but a life to be lived."

Are we called to believe in resurrection, and teach it as doctrine, or are we called to practice resurrection in the life that we live?

Jesus instructs that we are to practice resurrection when he says, “Love one another as I have loved you.”

We go astray when the Risen Christ is worshiped but not followed. To love one another is a call to action, modeled on Jesus’ love for the disciples. For the people with whom we are called to share the Good News of the resurrection, their future in the faith is often dependent on our ability to practice resurrection and not just preach it.

To practice resurrection with the very substance of our lives will be a constant expansion of our capacity to love. Jesus said, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for his friends.”

Take a moment and look around. Who is not here? There are so many, but they will not come to us. We must go to them, not in arrogance, but in humility. We must go with a love that shows resurrection to be substantive and life-giving, not as a doctrine. We must show a love so sacrificial, charitable, welcoming, and abundant that it reveals that we would give our very life so that they would receive that transforming love imparted by the resurrection.

Many will say, "I can't go so far as giving my life. Let us then say, We believe in the resurrection, and testify to that belief with what our earthly lives reveal about our faith in God.

When the worship ends, the service begins. Jesus said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name."

So let us ask God for what we need and then let us go, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit. Alleluia, Alleluia.