

Sermon 5 5&6 18 Saturday

“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” Good fast thinking Peter!

Peter was a good Jew. He was observant. He didn't eat the foods he wasn't supposed to eat. He stayed away from the people he was supposed to stay away from. He followed all the rules – all the rules for good Jewish behavior. But the Holy Spirit taught Peter that God can change the rules.

So in the verses *before* our reading from Acts for today, we get the whole story about Peter's visit with Cornelius the Centurion. We're in Cornelius' house here for this reading. Cornelius was a God-fearer, a non-Jew who, with his entire household, was a follower of the one God, the God of the Jews. The non-Jews who followed the God of the Jews were known as God-fearers, just like our Ethiopian Eunuch from last week's reading. But for someone like Cornelius to be a follower! This was very unusual for a Roman military man who was the leader of a cohort of about 440 men.

The God of the Jews was an entirely different kind of god from any other god the ancient peoples were familiar with. All other gods existed *with* other gods. They fought with each other and took sides and they were capricious: they might like you – they might not. They weren't just. They didn't care. You just had to please them.

The God of the Jews was the one and *only* God. More important, this God introduced *love* into the relationship and made the relationship between God and humans *real and loving*. This was all very different for the people of the 1st Century.

And even more surprising, this God was willing to come here and be human, not pretend to be human, but really *be* human and sacrifice himself for his people because he loves them. This was new! People sacrifice to gods, not vice-versa!

Cornelius worshipped the Jewish God and he lived a godly life. One day, in a dream, an angel came to him and told him to send for a man named Peter who was 30 miles away.

Meanwhile, Peter, 30 miles away, assumed like all the disciples, that God was just for *his* people, just for the Jews. Of course, there could be God-fearers and followers, but they could never *really* be God's people. And because Peter assumed that God was just for the Jews, he assumed that Jesus was just for the Jews too. All the disciples assumed this. That's

what Phillip had thought. Think of Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch. He was very surprised to be asked to tell the Ethiopian the Good News of Jesus Christ!

Now we have to remember: Peter was a stubborn guy. *Three times*, while Peter was dreaming, the Holy Spirit had to lower a sheet filled with forbidden, non-kosher foods in front of him. *Three times* the Holy Spirit had to command Peter to eat. Peter couldn't understand this terrible temptation. But the Holy Spirit answered, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Then Cornelius' men finally arrived and Peter began to get it. The Holy Spirit told him to go with them. He did, and when he entered Cornelius' house, imagine the excitement! Cornelius had brought together his entire extended family, and his friends, and the servants of his household to meet Peter. Peter first acknowledged, "You know I am a Jew. I'm not supposed to have anything to do with you! But God has taught me that I shouldn't be calling anyone who God accepts unclean." Then he told them the Good News about Jesus Christ, who offered them a whole new way to think about God – as Love Incarnate. Jesus loved them and asked for their love in return.

And then, as Paul preached, the Holy Spirit came down upon, fell upon this group of Gentiles (imagine Peter's shock and amazement!), and then we come to our reading. Peter asked, in amazement – "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" And of course, the answer was "NO." God was saying "YES!" to all of it and that was when the church blew wide open! The church opened up and truly began to be the church we know and love, with Cornelius as one of the first Gentile converts. That was when Peter found out that his family had many more members than he thought it did. The Christian Family began growing and growing, and it would never be the same. This is what happens when the Holy Spirit steps in: nothing is ever the same.

In the time of Peter and Cornelius, society was absolutely hierarchical. The message of the Holy Spirit, that we are all the same before God, was completely new and different, and probably *very scary*. But both of them followed where the Spirit was leading them.

Jesus says to us, "I have loved you in the same way God loves me – totally, no holding back, no fear, no caution, openly and unconditionally. That is what my church is about. And I want you to love each other the same way."

It's not about rules. It's about trust. God wants us to be members of a great family, a family that trusts each other, that can trust each other to be members of the Household of God. And that is what a parish is: a Household of God.

This is the vision God has for us: a church family that opens its doors and opens its arms to everyone, offering our love because God loves us.

Where else can so many different people, young and old, from all walks of life, join together in worship, in service, and at play? All able to trust each other.

Today, we honor our children, our future, and we honor the people of our Household who have taken the time to prepare lessons, to teach our children on Sundays.

Let me ask you to think back to when you were a child. I hope someone brought you to church – to Sunday School. What do you remember from those days? Jesus walked on water? Daniel was in a lion's den and the lions just sort of snoozed around him? Moses made dry land in the middle of a sea? Miracles? Jesus was a very nice man?

What are most likely the memorable moments from our years as children in church?

- + Meeting other kids not from my neighborhood or my school. Hey! New friends!
- + Treats at Coffee Hour
- + Nice ladies and men who teach Sunday School
- + Interesting stories
- + The Bible is an important book
- + Jesus was a nice person
- + Jesus loves me

Jesus loves me. That's the most important thing of all. If our children leave here knowing in their hearts that Jesus loves them, Sunday School has done what Jesus asks us to do. The stories, the Lord's Prayer, the Creeds – that's all great – but more important than anything else – Jesus loves them – always and forever – no matter what. We can all be part of that teaching. According to our baptismal covenant, the promise we make to every child in this church – we are all supposed to be part of that teaching.

And you can ask anyone who's taught Sunday School, it's not hard – especially if you do it with a partner. Think about helping with Sunday School next year. You'll have a chance to sign up this summer. Wonderful things happen in Sunday School – to everybody.

