

The Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 9, 2021
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More and more, I've come to realize that the book we know as "Acts" or more fully "The Acts of the Apostles" should better be entitled "The Acts of the Holy Spirit!" Right?

Once Spirit fell on those gathered on the Day of Pentecost, all Heaven broke loose – often in astonishing ways.

Our story for this morning is a wonderful example. But we need some background to really appreciate it.

We're told that Peter, that rough, headstrong, Galilean fisherman, somehow filled by God's Spirit, has been going here and there, preaching and healing in the name of Christ.

He has come to the town of Joppa, where he is staying with a fellow believer, Simon the tanner.

Meanwhile, a couple of days' journey from Joppa at the major city of Caesarea, there lives a Roman centurion (a commander of a large military unit in the Roman army), who we're told was a God-fearer – a Gentile sympathizer to Judaism, who believed in the one God of Judaism. His name is Cornelius.

One day, around 3 pm, Cornelius has a vision. An angel of God comes in and speaks to him by name. The angel says to him, **"Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter."** The angel even gives Cornelius the address of where Peter is staying! So, Cornelius, no doubt shaken a bit, calls two of his servants and a devout soldier, tells them about this vision, and the next day, sends them to Joppa.

Meanwhile, as the men are on their way to Joppa, around noon, Peter gets hungry. While his meal is being prepared, Peter goes up to the rooftop of the home where he is staying, and suddenly he falls into a trance and has a vision. In his vision, **He sees the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it are all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he hears a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat."** [Now, mine is one of the Red-Letter Bibles, where all of Jesus' sayings are printed in red. In my Bible, the words from this voice are in red!]

But Peter says, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice says to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happens three times, and the thing is suddenly taken up to heaven.

Scripture tells us, Peter was "inwardly perplexed" by this. Well, yeah! But at just that moment, the guys sent by Cornelius arrive. And as Peter is pondering the vision he has had, the Spirit says to him, **"Behold, three men are looking for you. Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them."**

So, Peter talks to the men, invites them to spend the night, and the next day goes with them, taking some of the Jesus followers along with him.

After another day on the road, they reach Caesarea, where Cornelius has called together a bunch of his friends and relatives. Cornelius greets them and tries to worship Peter, but Peter assures him he is simply a man, not to be worshiped.

Cornelius explains to Peter about his vision, and then Peter preaches to those gathered, telling the good news of Jesus – all that has happened.

And that's what brings us to the verses that are part of our lectionary for today.

While Peter is talking to them – this assortment of Gentiles (not Jews!) – the Holy Spirit falls on THEM! Everybody with Peter is shocked. And Peter, that devout Jewish follower of Jesus, so sure in his understanding of just whom God might call to become a fellow follower, Peter realizes that if the Holy Spirit has chosen them, who is he to withhold baptism from them. And so, he baptizes all of them in the name of Jesus the Christ.

Imagine. Imagine what this strongly opinionated Jewish fisherman had to overcome within himself, first to agree to accompany this bunch of Gentiles and meet with these other Gentiles and then, amazingly, to baptize them. Imagine!

So, I believe the question for us this morning, is this: what does it take to change your mind? To bring you to say “yes” to a new reality? To say “yes” to the Holy Spirit, when you were trained from a little one to believe otherwise?

Are there places in your life – in your personal belief system – where you have been brought to new realizations? New ways of thinking? Of understanding? Where, like Peter, you’ve had to let go of those closely held beliefs and open up to a new reality?

For me, raised in a lower middle class white family in Atlanta, Georgia, in the 40’s, 50’s, and 60’s, I’ve had to let go of a lot of tightly held beliefs about black people, about gay people, about people who believe in God in ways not the ones with which I was raised.

For me, there haven’t been any visions from God – no angels whacking me upside the head. Instead, my angels have been human beings whom I’ve gotten to know. People God has put in my path, given me opportunities to listen to, to hear stories from, to love and be loved by. People I had classified as “other” who were and are not “other” at all.

Jesus tells us in John 15: Abide in my love. Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

In a sense, by letting go of his closely held beliefs about “the other,” in a sense, Peter was laying down his life. He was surrendering having to be right – to be in control of how things are.

Jesus tells us, “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” He calls us friends – equals, called to serve side by side with Him. We are not to worry about who is first/most important in this service. We are not to worry about the backgrounds of one another. We are colleagues in ministry, colleagues in God’s service.

Jesus has appointed us to work together, to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.

And to do that, all we must do, with God’s help, is love.

Amen.