

This We Know: Promises for People of Faith & Doubt *God is Bigger*

Acts 10:34-48

July 14, 2024

The Book of Acts is the Holy Spirit's story. From beginning to end, God—through the Spirit—drives disciples to deeper devotion and to wider welcome. In Acts, the story starts with the ascension of Jesus and moves quickly to Pentecost, that day when the unrestrained, untamed Spirit of God blew through a gathering of believers bringing unity of faith and giving birth to the Church. From there, Acts tells us how God shapes this community *and* how the church struggles to keep pace with God's expansive and expanding vision.

Peter is the posterchild for this struggle, this tension. Peter, that sturdy stone singled out by Jesus to lead the emerging movement. Peter was an adaptive leader before there were business school courses on the topic or popular podcasts. Repeatedly, Peter must respond to the ceaseless stirring of the Spirit. His firmly entrenched, most deeply held convictions are shaken to the core. He is a witness to the disruptive, chaotic, life-changing, freeing, unencumbered power of the Holy Spirit, and he must decide how to respond to the Spirit's movement. In time, he learns to trust, to trust the promise that God is bigger than he had ever imagined.

Here is how it happened for Peter. On the day of Pentecost, his transformation begins. There, in the middle of the city, the Spirit of God descends on a diverse gathering of people, people from all nations, all languages, all perspectives. And Peter recognizes the moment for what it is. He finds the words he needs in the prophet Joel that fit the occasion: "In those days it will be, God declares, that I shall pour out my Spirit upon all flesh...and *everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." Peter preaches those words, and then he gets to work, proclaiming and teaching, caring for the poor and the sick, serving the

community, preaching the gospel with his words and in his deeds. His ministry is to his own people, faithful fellow Jews who know the law and the prophets, who keep the commandments, who are rooted in the traditions of the faith.

But this all changes in chapter ten, when a messenger of God visits a man named Cornelius, a Roman military commander living in Caesarea—and most importantly, a Gentile. The messenger tells Cornelius to search for a man called Peter. And meanwhile, on the other side of town, Peter is praying, and he too has a vision, a vision of God breaking down the boundaries that separated Jews from Gentiles. To his shock and surprise, Peter is commanded to eat food that he had been taught was unclean. When he protests, the voice of God responds with words that I believe were about far more than food. "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Now, those words are so shocking that they are repeated three times in this chapter. Peter is told to search for Cornelius and, when the two finally meet, Peter describes the transformation he has experienced. He says to Cornelius, "You yourself know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." Now just imagine the headlines the next day! *Christian-Jewish leader breaks the commands of God, associates with a Gentile in public!*

In public is where Peter speaks the words you just heard. It is a proclamation of the gospel, a personal testimony to transformation. Peter declares, "God shows no partiality."

Now I don't want you to miss this because what Peter describes is a previously unimaginable shift. You see, Peter has spent his entire life believing in a God

who shows partiality. Partiality to the chosen, to the inner circle, to those born under the promises of God, given the law and the covenant. Peter's most deeply held conviction was of a God who was partial to a particular people...until he is given a new picture of God's expansive grace. In other words, Peter has come to believe more in the Holy Spirit than in his carefully constructed ideology. He becomes convinced that God is bigger than he had previously imagined.

And what if it is true? What if all the boundaries and boxes and barriers we build are no match for the expanding reach of God's grace? Could this gospel good news also be the vision we need most now? Could being confronted by the reality of a frustratingly impartial God crush our tribal loyalties and our selfish certainties? And might that destruction be a deeper form of freedom?

I just love what happens next in the story. While Peter is preaching, the Spirit of God falls on *all* who are listening, and I mean *all*. Jew and Gentile, men and women, insiders and outsiders, believers and skeptics, clean and unclean, sophisticated and simple. All people. Those insiders who had come with Peter from Jerusalem are astounded, shocked, scandalized by the Spirit of God given to the Gentiles. But Peter has been prepared, and he knows just what to do. He stops the sermon. Imagine that. In the middle of making his point, in the middle of laying out his argument, Peter just stops. In fact, this half-finished homily is the last speech Peter will give. Instead of preaching, he asks the question on all their minds: can we withhold the water of baptism from those whom God has claimed? For Peter, the answer is obvious. All his protective barriers and exclusive restrictions are no match for the Spirit's radical acceptance. These outsiders are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, and the Church is set on a new course. All because Peter, our adaptive leader, dared to believe more in the Spirit than his formerly made-up mind.

Isn't it a powerful story? All week long I've been wondering if it could happen again, if somehow this

account from the Book of Acts could be more than a chapter in Church History. All week long I've been wondering if the stirring of the Spirit could once again open our hearts that have been shut tight, or reverse the process that has turned our neighbors into enemies and our disagreements into divorces. The conviction that we call faith would tell us that these stories are not restricted to the past. Our faith would tell us that there is nothing inevitable about the alarming disharmony we all experience in this moment. There is nothing inevitable about it. Our faith would tell us that the same Spirit of God still speaks, if we have the ears to listen and the will to answer. All week long I've been contemplating our desperate need for a vision of something bigger, something more significant and meaningful and sacred than our tight-fisted ideologies and our small-minded tribal identities. What if God is bigger than we had ever imagined? And I mean bigger than your fears. I mean bigger than your judgment. I mean bigger than your politics. I mean bigger than our impulse to divide and sort and criticize and condemn. I mean big enough for all. And listen to this: especially for the very one you are mostly likely to exclude. Bigger. Now you see, we would never do it this way. Thank God we are not in control here.

There was a birthday this week. It passed with almost no acknowledgment at all, and the birthday boy would have been so pleased by that. It was the 515th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, the founder of what we now call Presbyterianism. I had a quiet celebration, personal, private. I listened again to an interview with our most distinguished living Calvinist theologian, the writer Marilynne Robinson. And in response to a question about Calvin's legacy, here is what she said. "Calvinism was made to evolve. But Calvin was making some very valuable suggestions to us, and one of them was certainly this: that any encounter with another human being is an encounter with God. And there is always a question, and the question is always this: what would God want from this encounter?"

All week long I've been wondering how this insight could change the way we practice our faith. If you want a Christian message for our nation, could we start with this one? That every encounter with another human being is an encounter with God.

It's what Peter came finally to recognize, to celebrate, to preach, to stake his life on. It is what we must appreciate as well. If God shows no partiality, if the Spirit of God has come to all, then every human encounter is a vision of the divine.

My friends, you will never meet another person whom God does not love with the same passion and the same determination that has been poured out for you. Every face created in the image of God. Every child precious in her Creator's sight. Each moment a question—what does God want from this encounter?

So, what of us, this community of disciples we call Second Presbyterian Church in the city of Indianapolis? Might we erase the dividing lines between us? Could we engage our literal neighbors who have been strangers to us? Could we climb down from our platforms of self-righteousness and separateness to stand with those who suffer? Could we draw a wider circle? Could we believe in a bigger God?

I'm convinced that the church the Spirit is pleading with us to become is the bold vision the world needs most right now. These days it is so easy to think small. It is so easy to close the ranks, hunker down, lash out, restrict access, plug our ears, and shout *our* truth.

So easy. But not faithful.
Every encounter with each human being, a vision of God.

The question is this: Can we withhold the blessing of God from those who need it most? You already know the answer.