

Sermon: When Friends Show Up

Year B, Sixth Sunday of Easter

[Acts 10:44-48](#); [Psalm 98](#); [1 John 5:1-6](#); [John 15:9-17](#)

Offered May 6, 2018 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

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I find this morning's passage from Acts comforting. Jesus has been raised from the dead. He was walked at talked and eaten with his disciples. Jesus has ascended to heaven. Pentecost has come and gone. The followers of Jesus are at work in the world, building their community, building their church. So what's pretty much the first thing they do? They start bickering with each other about who's on the inside and who's on the outside, who to invite and who to ignore.

Peter was on the side that said Jesus' message was meant for the Jewish community around Jerusalem. Philip was on the side that said, nope, it was for everyone, including the gentiles, a polite way of saying it was for heathen, unbelieving idol worshippers that made up most of the Roman Empire. You know. *Those people.*

Right before today's reading, Peter, the head of the insiders only team, has gotten a call from Cornelius, a Roman officer. Cornelius is sending for Peter to come and share the Good News with Cornelius' whole household, family, friends, servants, slaves. And Cornelius is asking Peter to come because an angel told Cornelius to. That's a little weird. That an angel of the Lord would appear to an outsider.

Peter doesn't go until an angel shows up and tells him to get moving. So there are angels pushing this meeting forward from both directions, Peter's and Cornelius'. Peter and his crew turn up and start sharing the Good News. Just as we heard the Good News this morning. That we are loved by God. Loved so much that we are not subjects of God, but friends (John 15:14). We were chosen by God to bear fruit, fruit that will last (John 15:16). That we are being commanded by God so we might love one another. (John 15:17). Why were we chosen? Because God chose. Why are we loved and befriended? Because God loves. All we have to do is accept. In accepting, we will find the path laid out for us to chose and love and befriend others, not because of what they have done but because what God has done for us. That is nothing but Good News.

Why do I find the passage from Acts so comforting? Because in it I see the earliest traces of what becomes the Christian Church, struggling with the same thing the Brookline Community Church is struggling with as well.

From its birth, the Church, meaning the whole Christian enterprise, including the Brookline Community Church of today, has two tasks. One, it has to pass on the tradition from one generation to the next.¹ Two, it has to be open to the winds of the Holy Spirit by which the tradition comes alive for every generation.² When we laid Betty Hall to rest, we used the old words, the old order of service. When we baptize Anna and Miles at the end of June, we will use rituals that we see are already in place by the time the baptism in today's reading from Acts was

¹ Barbara K. Lundblad, "Sixth Sunday of Easter, Homiletical Perspective, Acts 10:44-48" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 481.

² Lundblad, 481.

complete, rituals which say it is not just water or Spirit that bring us into the church, but both together³ and done with the community of believers.

Now you can argue that we don't have the same Scriptural support for take home meals and senior luncheons and breakfast buffets. But the act of pulling together, laughing and teasing, or finding work for everyone to do, wherever their talents lie, the act of putting forward a table full for people to share, working to care for the widows and orphans and strangers among us, that has been part of the church from the beginning.

So all in all, we've got a pretty good organization set up to pass on the traditions. We can always do better, of course, and we'll keep working on it. Part of doing the pulpit swap was to take a good look at some of the traditions we're handing on and see if we're handing them on because they're meaningful to us or because we just got used to them.

But that remaining open to the Holy Spirit to make those traditions come alive, that seems to be the harder mandate. You can see how hard the challenge is even for the first generation of the church, where there are barely any traditions. *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* (Acts 10:45). The Jews who had come with Peter, head of team Let's-Keep-This-Christian-Thing-to-Ourselves, were *astounded* that the Holy Spirit had been poured out *even on the Gentiles*.

What astounded them? I think it was that the Holy Spirit wasn't following the rules they had laid down that you had to convert to Judaism first before becoming a Christian.⁴ When Peter asks "*Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?*" (Acts 10:47), I hear a little bit of covering himself for when he heads back to Jerusalem and people learn that a whole bunch of Gentiles were baptized without converting on his watch.⁵

We still have that insider/outsider thing going on. [Welcoming the Holy Spirit to speak]

But I think we have a bigger problem. In the reading from Acts, Team Peter was astounded that the Holy Spirit showed up to the gentiles. Today, in this church, I think we're astounded when the Holy Spirit shows up at all. We act as if we are going to do all this church stuff, the worship services, the music, the take home meals, the Faith Formation, the Breakfast Buffets and Senior Luncheons, we act as if we do all that on our own. I don't get the sense that we're trying to keep out the Holy Spirit. I get the sense we don't expect it to show up.

And yet of all the traditions we have in the Church, the big, overarching, 2,000 years of tradition Church, the Holy Spirit, the presence of a loving God in this world, here and now, is one of the most fundamental and unique to Christianity. What would change in the Brookline Church, what

³ William Baird, "The Acts of the Apostles" in *Interpreter's Concise Commentary: Acts & Paul's Letters: A Commentary on Acts, Romans, I & II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, edited by Charles M. Laymon, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1983), 42.

⁴ Theodore P. Ferris, "The Acts of the Apostles: Exposition," vol. 9 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1954), 141.

⁵ A. Katherine Grieb, "Sixth Sunday of Easter, Exegetical Perspective, Acts 10:44-48" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 483.

would change in our lives, if we accepted, we expected the Holy Spirit to show up? Not in a “God will provide, so we can sit back and do nothing” way, but in a “when the Holy Spirit shows up, the path gets cleared so a whole bunch more work can get done” way.

Look at today’s reading. The gentiles were baptized. And then they invited Team Peter *to stay for several days* (Acts 10:48). Because when the Holy Spirit shows up, that’s not the end of the work, that’s the beginning.⁶ The Good News takes some work to live into, takes some work to transform our lives and our world and our church, big “C” church and the Brookline Community Church. We have been appointed to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last. How much easier will that be, how much more lasting, when we see the Holy Spirit as our friend in this world? When like our human friends, we expect the Holy Spirit to turn up when we’re doing something hard? When like our human friends, we know we won’t have it all our way? When, like our human friends, we don’t have to be perfect to be loved? What more Good News is there than we are loved by God’s living presence in this world, here and now, to such an extent that we are friends?

⁶ William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), 85.