

An Easter Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church “No One is Outside the Reach of God’s Love and Grace”

By Eric Howell

Acts 10:44-48

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The reading from Acts this morning is the tail end of a story that takes the whole chapter 10. As far as I can tell, the story is never assigned to be read by the lectionary in its totality. Which is not so surprising since it is over 40 verses long. But it’s such an important story in shaping the course and understanding of the gospel in the early years, that Peter, one of the main characters in the story, retells this experience twice to other audiences in the book of Acts. Those summaries appear in the lectionary, but not the whole story. So you can get the SportsCenter highlight version from time to time on a Sunday morning, or you can get the whole picture by reading Acts 10 on your own.

It’s a story of Peter and the church having their eyes opened to the new ways God continually surprises them. It is about how the categories we have come to accept that divide us are broken down by Jesus Christ. And on a day when we baptize by the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord, it is a suggestion of just what that may mean for each of us.

The passage read this morning has aspects to it that just aren’t that surprising if you’ve been reading through the first nine chapters of this book.

Peter is preaching, which is not surprising. You could trace the book of Acts to this point by Peter’s sermons. In Acts 2, he preaches at the day of Pentecost. In Acts 3, he preaches to a gathering crowd in Jerusalem after a man was healed from paralysis. In Acts 4, he preaches to the religious leaders in Jerusalem. He’ll do it again in Acts 11. The Peter we see in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John is always pretty quick to speak. In Acts he gets his chance.

Also, while Peter is speaking, the Holy Spirit descends on everyone. They speak in tongues. They are given the gifts of the Spirit. We aren’t really told much about what that means. By this point, we are supposed to know, I guess. They did. They understood. They knew how to recognize the arrival of the Spirit of God. Again, neither the characters in the story, the narrator, nor the readers are particularly surprised by this. By this point we’ve grown accustomed to some pretty amazing things happening in Acts. It’s all over the pages:

Jesus ascends up into the clouds.

The Spirit comes down with tongues of fire and flames and people are given a gift of speaking in each other’s languages.

The lame walk again. Acts 5:12 says that “many signs and wonders were done.” So much so that people would bring out the sick into the streets in hopes that just the shadow of the disciples would fall on them and make them well. Pretty amazing times. So by the time we get to chapter 10, “the Holy Spirit fell and they were given the gifts of the Spirit” is not shocking. It’s the kind of thing we’ve come to expect.

So, what’s going on here is not so much about who’s doing it or what is done. What’s amazing is WHO it is being done to and with. At this moment, gathered together were Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews). How did they get together here? Well, you know, read the story. It’s a miracle unto itself. But here they are. For Gentiles, this moment of pluralism isn’t such a big deal. Gentile simply is the Biblical word for non-Jew. It’s everyone who isn’t a Jew, no matter where they come from or what other religion they might practice, but generally it meant the people from all those kinds of places now grouped together in the Roman empire.

Gentiles as such generally lived in an existence in which they crossed paths with all sorts of people all the time. They came to more or less accept their differences in the great melting pot of the Roman Empire with its pantheons of gods and easy comfort with all kinds of worship to all kinds of deities. Just not a big deal. To the Jews it was a really big deal. The God of the Jews was always acting jealous, always coming down hard on his people for turning to other gods. You may remember that the sort of motto of the people was the *shema* from Deuteronomy: “Hear o Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your might.”

For serious Jews this was serious stuff. Spending too much time with other kinds of people might lead to worshipping other kinds of gods—better to stay away from it. Don’t want to get corrupted. Don’t want to get compromised.

Remembering that Jesus was a Jew, all the disciples were Jews, the lame man who walked was a Jew, the church in Acts 2 that shared everything in common were all Jews, the people on whom the tongues of fire of the Holy Spirit fell in Acts 2 were all Jews, the power of this passage is this, “they were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit has been poured out EVEN on the Gentiles.”

Perhaps this was so surprising because they thought that being a Christian was a subset of being a Jew. The way of following Jesus’ teaching was just one way of being a better follower of Moses’ law. While it seems strange for us to imagine such a worldview at this day and time, it’s totally understandable why they would think that way. It was what they knew and Jesus actually did quite little to force them to think otherwise. We all have a tendency to follow what we already know. That’s just natural. And were one of them to make an argument that this new movement is for Jews and Gentiles, he would have little from their scripture to back it up and little from their tradition to call upon.

But here they are confronted with the inescapable reality of their experience of being with Gentiles on whom the Spirit has fallen. Whether the common interpretations of scripture pointed toward it, whether it fit in their tradition, it happened. God is doing a

new thing. And their understanding of God had to catch up and reinterpret their scripture and renarrate their tradition in light of what they were so clearly and powerfully experiencing.

Peter is the first to speak (no surprise there!). “Can anyone deny these people the waters of baptism based on what we’ve seen here?” Can anyone say that these non-Jews, uncircumcised foreigners, are any less Christians than you or I? And they all agreed. And the church irreversibly and fundamentally shifted in that moment. That moment. Everything changed. When they saw with their eyes and souls that Jesus Christ is not just for one group of people or one kind of people, but that he is Lord of all, the church and her mission changed. It didn’t happen without some difficulty and without some pain. Change always causes pain. But the New Testament and the story of the spread of the Gospel from that moment was set in motion here. For the first time, they understood the full import of Jesus’ final challenge to his followers, “You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

As we come to baptize this morning, it is a good day for the Church that has gone to the ends of the earth. Anytime any person—man or women, boy or girl—makes the decision to follow Christ and make the faith their own, to trust in Christ for forgiveness of sins, life everlasting, and become part of the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, something good has happened. Not just to that person, but to all the church. It is a day of celebration.

It’s a good day for DaySpring. In a bit we’ll file out to the hillside and gather around the old trough to welcome one of our children, pray together, and to renew our creedal vows. The day of baptism is a good day for those who have been baptized to reflect on their own baptisms and remember the day when their faith was sealed. Days of baptism are good days for those who are not baptized to, perhaps, imagine themselves entering the waters as a sign of being born to new life in Christ.

For all of us, especially in light of this story about the church’s early lessons in the grace of God, it is important to remember again that there is no one and nothing outside of the reach of the love and grace of God.

Your enemy is not outside the reach of the love and grace of God. Pray for him.

Your neighbor is not outside the reach of the love and grace of God. Pray for her.

Your child is not outside the reach of the love and grace of God. Pray for him. For her.

Your co-worker is not outside the reach of the love and grace of God.

Your roommate is not outside the reach of the love and grace of God.

No one that you may give up hope on is outside the reach of the love and grace of God.

Your heart and your life is not outside of the reach of the love and grace of God. Nothing in your life is outside the reach of the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ.

When we are baptized, we confess, “Jesus Christ is Lord.” To say that is not just to make a dedication about what religion you belong to, that you will go to a church rather than some other religious building on Sunday. That you will read the Bible rather than some other religious book. It means those things, but Jesus Christ is Lord is a statement of your whole life, not just the overtly religious parts.

Thomas Merton writes about the importance of understanding the wholeness of life. He writes, “the spiritual life is not just the life of the mind, or of the affections, or of the ‘summit of the soul’—it is the life of the whole person.” For the spiritual man is one whose whole life, in all its aspects and all its activities has been spiritualized by the actions of the Holy Spirit. 1 Corinthians 10:31 says the spiritual man is one who “whether he eats or drinks or whatever else he does, does all for the glory of God.”

In like manner, to say Jesus Christ is Lord is to open your eyes to see the Holy Spirit fall on every part of your life and see it transformed: your enemies and neighbors. Your co-workers and roommates. Your family and friends. Your job and money (or lack thereof). Your yesterdays washed clean and your tomorrows guided. Your today embraced by the love and grace of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. From whom nothing can separate us. Indeed, what can separate any of us from the love of God? Neither life nor death, nor angels nor demons, nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.