

**Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church**  
**Reverend Dr. Daris Bultena**

**May 17, 2009**

**6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**

Acts 10:44-48

<sup>44</sup>While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. <sup>45</sup>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, <sup>46</sup>for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, <sup>47</sup>"Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" <sup>48</sup>So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

John 15:9-17

<sup>9</sup>As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. <sup>10</sup>If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. <sup>11</sup>I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

<sup>12</sup>"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup>No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. <sup>14</sup>You are my friends if you do what I command you. <sup>15</sup>I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. <sup>16</sup>You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. <sup>17</sup>I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

### **"Unconditional Love"**

**"While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word." Oh, yes, this is Acts and Chapter 10—do you know this story? This is, what might be termed, the Gentile Pentecost. It is a wonderful story about the movement of God and God's incredible way of bringing about that which should be.**

**Our reading for the day, where the Holy Spirit is falling on all who hear, does not come until deep into the story. This is the story of Peter.**

**Peter was that disciple who was bold enough to respond, when Jesus asked the question, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter said, "You are the**

**Messiah.” Then, just an instant later when Jesus was telling those same disciples that he would suffer and die, it was Peter who rebuked him and told him, “No, no, don’t even talk that way.” Jesus had to call him out on that and call him back into the circle.**

**This same Peter was the one who raised his voice after the Ascension on the Day of Pentecost. He is the one who interpreted what was happening for those who were watching. Peter was the one that called to mind that old text from the prophet Joel: “In these last days it will be that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.”**

**Peter had been on an amazing journey. He had been with Jesus and he was there on the Day of Pentecost and so filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter was doing amazing work for God as he and the others were casting their nets and fishing for people. Thousands were being added to the number of those who believed. Each day the church was multiplying exponentially.**

**As the story goes, Peter is having more frequent encounters with fringe people. Fringe people are those who are followers of Jesus but are not central practitioners of the Jewish faith at the same time. We see that in what happens at Joppa. While Peter is staying in Joppa, Tabitha, who is also known as Dorcas, dies. When Peter is brought to her he raises her from the dead. After he does this we are told that Peter goes and stays with Simon, who is a tanner.**

**Now that does not sound too extraordinary to us, but realize that if he is staying with someone who is a tanner that says something. What it says is that he is associating more and more with fringe people. To be a tanner is work with animals. Recall that such work with animals would involve much that is ritually unclean. So we can easily make the association that this Simon is a fringe person.**

**It is at this point of Peter's staying with Simon the Tanner, that we come to Chapter 10 of the Book of Acts. As the chapter opens there is in Caesarea a man named Cornelius. He is identified as a centurion of the Italian Cohort. What is abundantly clear is that he is beyond a fringe person—there is no fringe at all. He is an outsider. He is a gentile. But this gentile, we are told in the words of Acts 10, "was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God."**

**He worships. He is a Gentle. He practices the pietistic markings of a faithful person.**

**And one afternoon at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon Cornelius has a vision in which he sees an angel of God coming to him. Cornelius gets it that this is not imagination, it is not dream, it is not day dream—this is an encounter with the Lord. This is a meeting face to face with the holiness of God.**

**In the vision the angel tells Cornelius that his prayers and alms have ascended to God. And in Joppa, staying with a man called Simon is a man named Peter. The angel tells Cornelius to send for Peter. This is the Holy Spirit at work.**

**So Cornelius sends two of his slaves (his employees or representatives) to go to the house in Joppa by the seaside and seek out and visit with this Peter who is lodging there.**

**Now it is the next day. And about high noon Peter goes up on the roof of the house to reflect and pray. He is practicing his faith. It is noon, but the priority is prayer. As Peter is up there on the roof of the house praying he is hungry, yet he is in prayer and falls into this trance prayer state. It is in that state that he has a vision. In the vision the heavens open up and there is a large sheet like thing coming down and on the**

sheet are all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds. The whole of it is being lowered by the four corners of the sheet.

Peter hears this voice that says to him, “Get up and kill and eat.” Peter responds in the way of someone who knows how to keep the law. He answers, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.”

The voice answers back, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

It happens three times, and then the sheet like thing is taken back into heaven. This is the Holy Spirit at work.

It is not surprising that Peter is puzzled by what has just taken place. As he is scratching his head trying to figure out what is going on and what it is he is supposed to learn, as that is happening, the two envoys who have been sent to seek him out come down the lane and find him.

While Peter is still thinking about it, the men are at the gate. In that moment the Holy Spirit says to Peter, “There are three men looking for you; you go with them. Go with them without hesitation.” This is the Holy Spirit at work.

Peter gets up, calls out to the men and announces, “I am the one you are looking for. What do you want?” The men proceed to tell him about Cornelius. So Peter invites them into the house to remain for the night.

The next day the whole entourage—Peter and those that Cornelius had sent—get up and go along with some of the believers from Joppa and they head towards Caesarea.

At the same time Cornelius has gathered his family around him. When they arrive Cornelius falls down before Peter and worships him.

**Peter makes it clear that he is only a person and should not be worshiped—he tells Cornelius to get up.**

**He then goes in and visits with Cornelius. He recalls to all those gathered that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile, but that God had shown him that he should not call anyone profane or unclean and this is why when he was sent for he came without objection. Ah, this is the Holy Spirit at work.**

**Cornelius then tells Peter about the vision that he had the other day. Yes, this is the Holy Spirit at work.**

**At this point Peter begins to tell the story. He begins to preach. He begins to share the Good News. He says, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality...” You see, for Peter to say that—this is the Holy Spirit at work!**

**Peter tells how God sent Jesus Christ who is Lord of all to preach peace to Israel. He recalls the truth about this one and all that he did—how he proclaimed peace, healed the sick, cast out demons, did good, and liberated the oppressed. And he tells how this same Jesus was crucified and then raised from the dead. He makes it clear that he and those with him are witnesses to these things. He is a firsthand witness to the power of God and the incredible work of Jesus the Christ.**

**He goes on to share that Jesus commanded them to preach about this and to share this Good News. He also interprets that this is the one that the prophets were speaking about and shows the associations between the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) and Jesus.**

**He shares his faith journey and that through belief in Jesus and in this incredible revelation there is forgiveness and life. He makes a point of telling them that there is forgiveness and life in the name of Jesus.**

**Oh, this is the Holy Spirit at work.**

**And then we arrive at the point that our reading for the day begins. This entire story thus far is prelude to what happens next. The text says (verse 44): “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.”**

**Now get it that the Holy Spirit fell upon ALL who heard the word while Peter was speaking. The point being, the ALL part. Those who had come with Peter noticed it. They were the firsthand witnesses to this that these Gentiles were clear recipients of the power of the Holy Spirit.**

**This is the Holy Spirit at work!!**

**At this point Peter is the one who gets it so clearly as he says of them all—“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And Peter orders them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. And they are baptized. The first Gentiles to be baptized.**

**This is the Holy Spirit at work!!**

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**It is all about fences and boundaries. We are all about fences and boundaries. We are all about who is in and who is out. We can identify those who are in and those who are out. Those who are in—those who are part of our in crowd will act a certain way, will talk a certain way, will live a certain way.**

**What is that certain way? It is our way.**

**Ask us about boundaries. Ask us if we are inclusive or exclusive. Ask us.**

**Yes, ask us and we will tell you that we are inclusive. We will tell you that everyone is allowed in. We may even be so astute as to espouse the rock solid theology that is behind our position. Everyone is allowed in and diversity is welcome because God creates in diversity. A God who creates in diversity surely not only allows it but loves it, embraces it, wants it—and then so do we.**

**We love diversity. We welcome all. We want everyone. Just ask us.**

**But the truth of the matter is not found in asking us. Were I to ask any of you about your views of inclusivity, racism, and boundaries. You would tell me that you are open. You would probably relay stories to me about ways in which you have demonstrated openness to others, to groups, to ones different from you. And I love such demonstrations of inclusivity.**

**Yet, it is deeper than what we tell. It is about who we are.**

**Our boundaries. Our fences. Our invisible fences. We tend to have them. We tend to put them up. We build up these invisible walls not only to keep others out, but often to keep others from coming in—from getting too close. If someone gets too close, what if they see, I mean really see us and really see what is happening in our life? What if that happens?**

**So we build them up—those walls. And we have them, those fences. We know them without articulating them or admitting to them—those boundaries. So silent and invisible lines that we do not cross.**

**Ask us about them and we won't tell you that they are there. It is not that we are trying to be deceptive, it is that in our logical and reasoned mind they are not there. But it is deeper than that—it is about who we are.**

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**Ask Peter. Ask Peter and he would have told you that God shows no partiality. At the same time he would have not gone into a Gentile house or associated with them. He would not have done that it was forbidden. Ask him though, and he was open. Look at his living, however, and he was not.**

**Until—enter the Holy Spirit. And visions later and being called from the tanner’s house to Caesarea, things changed. So that this time it was different. This time when he said, “I understand that God shows no partiality...” He understood it. It was not just words. He got it. He saw the Holy Spirit fall upon those Gentiles just as legitimately as it had fallen on him on the Day of Pentecost.**

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**Jesus told them, “I don’t call you slaves, but I call you friends.” “Love one another as I have loved you.” “Abide in me as I abide in you.”**

**Ask them if they understood that. Ask them and they may not be able to tell you.**

**But watch them. “Greater love has no one than that he lay down his life for his friends.” And they saw it happen. They saw it happen. They saw him lay down his life and die. They saw him die. Then they saw him alive. They experienced the resurrection.**

**And he called them friends. It was that relationship. He was not far away. He was not in the sky by and by—or so lofty and high up that he could not be reached. He was their friend.**

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**It is that aspect of friendship that Aristotle speaks of and about. The nature of friendship is that one takes on the characteristics of the other. The one friend becomes like the other.**

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**We are invited to take on the characteristic. It is that unconditional love. Jesus loved them to the end. Yes, but he loved them beyond the end. This is the kind of love that God has for us. It is a love that goes beyond all we ask or imagine. It is a love that never stops. It is a love that is constant and continual. It is a love that even death cannot take away or remove or slow down or hinder.**

**It is without condition.**

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**Ask us. Ask Peter. Ask us and we will tell you we have it.**

**Yet, it is not until the boundaries start to fall. It is not until we tear down the walls. It is not until we pull up the fences that we live this unconditional love.**

**It is the moment—this is the day—now is the time for us in our living as resurrection people to lean our shoulder into it—to push through and knock down the fence.**

**It is comfortable to just stay to our own. Just breathe in and enjoy being together. But there is Cornelius out there waiting for you. And there are others out there waiting for you and for me to be open to them.**

**And this openness that we are being called to is not about just giving the hungry some food or the poor some money—this openness we are being called to is deeper than that. It is about our being friend. It is about our love.**

**It is about this love of God that cannot be stopped. It is about this love of God that cannot be limited or bounded or fenced. It is about this love of God that is in us and this week someone else is longing to see in us.**

**Why? How? When? What?**

**Oh, in you—in me—in us The Holy Spirit is at work. Unconditional love. At work in us—and we are to allow the Spirit to do the Spirit's work in us.**

**The Holy Spirit is at work!! Amen.**