

Acts 10: 44-48 Breaking Barriers

The introductory passages of the Book of Acts refer briefly to the life of Jesus but really Acts opens presenting an account of the instructions given to the disciples by the risen Jesus to await the coming of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem. The focus is on the future and how they are to continue his mission. Jesus tells them the Holy Spirit will bring them power and will enable them to become his witnesses to the truth he brought that God's kingdom was near. Jesus ascends and Pentecost brings the Holy Spirit. From then on the Spirit moves out and about in them and in the world in ways they obviously don't expect. On the next two Sundays we will have readings about the Ascension and then consider what happens at Pentecost. But last Sunday and today in our readings we are told about the world view shattering actions of the Holy Spirit among these first disciples. Before the crucifixion they had expected the anointed one to restore Israel as a nation of power on earth and to free them from oppressive Roman rule. The crucifixion seemed at first to destroy their hopes that Jesus was that anointed one, the one promised by God to offer salvation. Then the resurrected Jesus appeared and told them that Rome had not won; they had just misunderstood what God was doing through the Messiah. They were to spread this news—this good news—the Kingdom or Reign of God was near. God was in control, not Caesar and the Romans. The disciples, at Pentecost are filled with the Holy Spirit and then begin spreading the news in Jerusalem and the surrounding area—going first to their Jewish brothers and sisters. Persecution follows and they are scattered. As they travel to escape they continue to witness—to Samaritans and others. Last week we read how Phillip was sent to meet with the eunuch from Ethiopia. The eunuch was evidently was a God-fearer, one who worshiped Yahweh but would not have been allowed to participate in the Temple rituals because of his status as a eunuch. Yet the Spirit sent Phillip to him as he was reading the Isaiah text. The same text which the disciples saw as describing the way Jesus' life fulfilled the qualities of the promised Messiah. The Spirit's actions are inclusive. Samaritans, traditional enemies of those practicing the faith centered in Jerusalem are hearing and believing the good news. A God-fearing eunuch rejected by those same Temple officials receives baptism into the faith. Those actions were outside the box of who was culturally acceptable into the traditional community. Barriers were being broken. The Way as this new understanding of faith was called had already begun to expand from its origins in and around Jerusalem. It was gaining followers all around the Mediterranean. This was no easy feat. There were long held traditions of the Jewish people which were brought into question. To adapt from Jewish to non-Jewish cultures required excruciating growing pains on the part of those spreading the good news as the message was heard outside the synagogue. Did new followers have to be circumcised—as adults? Did they have to follow Jewish dietary customs? These were all issues which caused conflict within the first Jewish followers of the faith. Peter in his first speech after receiving the Holy Spirit quoted the prophet Joel stating what was becoming apparent—the Spirit was not nearly as selective about who would be included as once was believed. Joel said: "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh." The key word here was "all flesh", not just a chosen few. Our passage today comes at the end of a prolonged story where the Spirit makes clear that thought patterns about who was invited into the community would have to change. This passage is based upon the

meeting of Peter, the leader of the apostles and Cornelius, a Roman army officer. They meet because of the intervention of the Holy Spirit. Peter has been traveling outside of Jerusalem and has just done an amazing act of healing in Joppa. Cornelius lives in Caesarea and is initially described not only as a centurion but also as a devout man who feared God with all his household. He was not Jewish and had not fully converted to Judaism through circumcision and dietary changes, but we are told he gave alms and practiced Jewish piety. The story which begins in Acts 10:1 is rather like a play with several scenes. Scene one would be when one afternoon Cornelius has a vision, a visitation by an angel of God who tells him that God has taken notice of his prayers and alms. Cornelius is told to send to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter to hear what Peter has to say. A side note here: Cornelius is not only told to send for Peter, but also that Simon Peter is staying in Joppa with a tanner also named Simon. This is another barrier which has evidently been broken by these Jewish disciples as a tanner—one who handled dead animals—would have been considered unclean and a Jewish religious leader would not have stayed with him. Cornelius having been given the details of where to find Peter selects two slaves and a soldier from his household; explains their mission and sends them off to Joppa with a message for Peter. After the messengers are on their way, the text's focus shifts to what could be called scene two: Peter's experiences in Joppa. The day after Cornelius has his vision, Peter is praying about noon on the roof of Simon's dwelling. He becomes hungry and while he is waiting for food to be prepared—the text says he fell into a trance. During this trance Peter also has a vision. This description of this vision is rather detailed. The heavens open and something which looks like a large sheet is lowered by its corners. On the sheet are all kinds of animals, four footed as well as reptiles and birds, clean and unclean. A voice commands: "Get up Peter, kill and eat." Scene three would be Peter rebelling against this idea. Being a devout Jew meant keeping certain things off the menu so Peter refuses saying, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." Peter's statement recognizes that this message is from God, but his traditional view rejects the idea. This command about eating is repeated three times with the addition of the statement "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Peter does not exactly get on board with this change at this point. We are told that he is greatly puzzled about the meaning of what the vision showed him. At this moment scene four begins with the arrival of the messengers from Cornelius. The Holy Spirit tells Peter he is about to receive visitors and that he is to go with them without hesitation because they have been sent by the Holy Spirit. Peter leaves the roof, meets the visitors and discovers they have come from Cornelius, a Roman centurion who has had a visit from an angel directing that this invitation to Peter. Peter is not sure what was going on, but since the Lord had told him about their coming, he invites them in and gives them lodging for the night. This point is often overlooked because of the following scenes, but it is important to note that this is already a very unusual occurrence. A devout Jew, Peter, staying at the home of one designated by the faith as unclean, Simon the tanner, invites into hospitality two slaves and a Roman soldier with whom table fellowship and association would not have been acceptable traditionally—more barriers have been crossed which separate people. The next morning provides a transition to scene five as Peter and some other believers go with these messengers to the home of Cornelius. When scene five opens, Cornelius welcomes Peter and the others into his home where the whole household has been

assembled to hear what Peter has to say. The opening to this conversation is Peter's statement that what he is doing by coming to the home of a Gentile is unlawful, but since God was directing the visit—he has come anyway. He then asks Cornelius why he has been asked to come. This leads to an exchange of vision descriptions. Peter then preaches a sermon to those gathered Gentiles which begins "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." Peter goes on to tell them about Christ, his ministry, death by crucifixion and his resurrection. This is the point at which we find our brief passage for this morning. The Holy Spirit enters the dwelling of the Gentile Cornelius while Peter is still speaking. According to our text—the Holy Spirit not only entered but fell upon all who heard the word. This was made manifest to those who accompanied Peter by these uncircumcised gentiles beginning to speak in tongues as had happened to the disciples at Pentecost. The circumcised Jewish believers were astounded by the sight. Peter declares, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit as we have?" The baptisms occur in the name of Jesus Christ. Peter remains in this Gentile household for several days—thus continuing the "unlawful" behavior according to his tradition. The play seems to end there with the acceptance of believing gentiles into the community. When Peter declared, "God shows no partiality," he opened the possibility that anyone—everyone—is welcome to the family of faith. He didn't make a list of the folks who should be included in faith communities. He didn't make a biblical case for this assertion declaring that the traditions of the Jewish faith like the dietary laws were moot. He seems to have something in common with the comedian whose refrain was "the devil made him do it". Only for Peter his basis seems to be simply—the Spirit made me do it. He also has a message of warning for us—the rules were changed for us, so we could come in—who are we then, to prevent God from blessing the whole human family? Who are we to stand in the way of the outpouring of God's love? The Holy Spirit is still active today. Through the movement of the Holy Spirit God is saying to all who live beyond the barrier of separation from God: I have come to life in Jesus Christ and in the presence of the Holy Spirit to break down all that separates you from me. I hear your prayers. I come to visit your house no matter how small or its location. I pour out my Spirit of life upon you. I break down the barriers of sin, Satan, and death that have kept you from me. Even to you this day I give the possibility of repentance into life. When God says that to the world, who are we to establish barriers? As we abide in God's love, so too are we called to let God's love abide in us for others; to be open to the Spirit's call to recognize that barriers belong to us, not to God. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.