



LOOK WHO THE SPIRIT LET IN!

May 6, 2018, Confirmation Sunday, the Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 10: 44-48

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The Scripture reading today is part of a longer story told in Acts 10:1-11:18. These 66 verses tell *the* pivotal event in the early church. It is here that the early followers of Jesus, and the fledging church that was forming among them, begin to understand that whatever they thought it might mean to follow the Risen Christ, to be “the church,” it was going to be a wilder ride than they knew. Like the twists and turns of a roller coaster, they might have wished for a safety bar to grip as things went in unexpected directions right and left and upside down. As it turns out, God was determined for the church of Jesus Christ to be far more than anyone had yet imagined. You could say we are still a work in progress!

The word “astounded” in our scripture passage today could be coupled with “amazed” or even “shocked” at where the Holy Spirit is taking the church. It is a perfect story on this glorious day when 26 young people confirm the baptismal promises made on their behalf when they were only babies. It is a good day for us, with Peter and his companions, to look at these newest members and say with delight and amazement, “Look who the Spirit let in!”

Will Willimon, a retired United Methodist bishop, says that sometimes in the church the question is asked, “Will Jewish people be saved even if they do not believe in Jesus?” This question is often asked, he says, because we perceive ourselves as ‘insiders’ concerned about the fate of the ‘outsider.’ But in the Book of Acts, this question would have been a strange one. In Acts, that issue was settled at the dawn of history, when God chose the people of Israel as God’s own and made covenant to be their God. The promises of God are never forgotten or revoked. Instead, Willimon says, the question in Acts was this: “Will the *gentiles*



be saved?” The massive question facing the Jewish early church was whether there was a place for gentiles...people like most of us in this sanctuary today...was there a place for *us* in the church that was forming! Acts 10:1-11:18 tells God’s astounding answer: Yes, there is a place within the chosen family of God for gentiles, too.¹

Cornelius is the first gentile who, along with his entire household, is welcomed into the church fully through baptism. It is an amazing story—for Cornelius is not just any regular gentile—he is a Roman army officer, which means he swore an oath to the Emperor, considered a god among the many gods the gentiles worshipped. Yet, Cornelius is also said to fear God, the God of Israel, and to be generous in giving alms to the poor.

This morning, those of us who fear God, that is, those of us who love and honor God in every part of our lives, have been invited to prayerfully consider increasing, or perhaps for some of us to begin giving, our financial support to the church. This church depends upon your Christian practice of generosity. Now, many of you already give generously, even sacrificially to the church. Yet, we are facing a budget shortfall that has implications for our programs and mission. For the next weeks, we have an added opportunity to give, with our offering multiplied by matching funds from an anonymous donor. May we, like Cornelius, too, be inspired by faith our in God to give generously in a time of need.

Cornelius is also generous in faith, bringing his entire household before Peter where the Holy Spirit fell upon them and they were all baptized together. In written statements of faith, these Confirmands named those who had helped to form them in faith. Mothers and fathers were among the most influential mentors in faith and in moral development. Teachers and friends also made the list. Even a few siblings got a shout out as inspirational (though also annoying). And grandparents were named as well, with one person noting that it was her grandparents who gave her her first Bible, explained why it is important to say grace before dinner, and why it is important to worship and love God who has given us so much. Just as in Cornelius’ household, faith is a shared effort. We need our biological families and

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



also the larger household of this congregation as together we share the responsibility and honor of teaching, modeling, and practicing the faith.

Peter and Cornelius would never have entered each other's homes because Jews and gentiles did not share intimate spaces or eat the same food at a shared table. Yet in Acts, over and over again, boundaries and divisions are erased. Peter and Cornelius each receive a vision from God that invites them to enter a larger household and to set a bigger table.

This past year in Confirmation, the youth have been learning more about who Jesus was and what he taught and preached. Here are excerpts from their faith statements about what they have learned and the implications for the church that bears his name:

- Something I appreciate learning about Jesus this year is how he loved everybody regardless of their place in life, the poor and the sick to the rich and the powerful...Jesus knew that all were children of God...Jesus believes in second chances for everyone...Jesus brought all divergent people into his community of the Church to worship God all together, incorporating diverse peoples into one body, the body of the church.

Asked to name some things they appreciate about The Brick Presbyterian Church and the larger family of faith we are part of in the PCUSA:

- I appreciate the sense of community and how friendly and inclusive and open-minded everyone is...No matter how long it is between times I get to church or activities I always still feel welcome and like I am an important part of the community. It is a home I can always come back to...I appreciate that the Brick Church is always welcoming more and more members...I appreciate how the Brick Church incorporates current issues and events into sermons...I grew up in this church. I started my first day of school at Brick. I attend church on a regular basis. Being part of this church has helped make me who I am today and it has formed me into a better person overall. I want



my kids to go through the same experience...Being part of the Presbyterian Church means being open and accepting to all. The Presbyterian Church accepts female reverends as well as people from the LGBTQ community. In my mind, this embodies Jesus' morals, as Jesus was open and welcoming to all...If we all had the same talents or gifts, society would be a boring place to live in. God gives us all different talents and gifts, creating many diverse and interesting cultures.

In the passage we read today, Peter and his Jewish companions were astounded that God had given the gift of the Holy Spirit to a bunch of gentiles. In response, all Peter can say is this: "Can anyone deny withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" In time, "these people" will become dear brothers and sisters in the Lord. We welcome "these confirmands" to join us as full and equal members of the church. Some of them in the future hope to serve as a deacon, an elder, or a trustee. They plan to serve in mission, work with the children or youth, and to exercise their voice and their vote. One Confirmand said this: "I believe that even now I already contribute to the church being a member of the Order of Saint Paul. My family also donates time, talent, and tithes to the church."

Peter and his companions could not have known the day they baptized gentiles how this bold new step would change the course of the church forever. Those changes would not always be easy or smooth—and change is still hard for the church. But as Will Willimon reminds us: "This is the way it sometimes is in the church. If Jesus Christ is Lord, then the church has the adventurous task of...expecting surprises and new implications of the gospel...Faith, when it comes down to it," he notes, "is our often breathless attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God, to keep asking ourselves, 'What is God doing? Where on earth is God going now?'"

We are changed when new people join us and this class of Confirmands has new ideas to share. Their statements of faith included what they appreciate about the Brick Church, *and* what they would change. Here are some new ideas:



- I would like to see more diversity in our congregation...to have a Blessing of the Animals Service. I love and value the importance of animals in my life and I believe they should be included in other aspects of our lives, including religion...to have more events for the casual member or visitor...insert solar panels at least on the roof of the school. God's most prodigious gift to humans is the earth and it is Brick's moral obligation to protect the planet; it would also be a witness to our neighborhood...I would like to sing more upbeat hymns in worship...I would have sermons that are short and to the point. (Still working on that.)

After Peter ordered the baptism of the gentiles, he himself was ordered to appear before a church council to explain his outrageous action. Suddenly, the Holy Spirit had set all of them on a journey whose ending they could not clearly see.

One person in this year's Confirmation class offered advice to those younger considering Confirmation in the future. It's advice to which Peter and Cornelius would offer a hearty, Amen! Not only to Confirmands but to the rest of us as well:

“You will go through a journey in Confirmation, so don't be stuck at the beginning, the end, or anywhere in the middle the whole way. It's not really a journey if you do that. Enjoy the process, and be receptive to new ideas and information.”

As far as I can tell, that's what the Spirit has been saying to the church since the very beginning. And the Spirit is still about the wild work of bringing us to the great feast at a table bigger than we have yet imagined.

Thanks be to God.

ⁱ This quote and others are from William H. Willimon in *Interpretation: Acts* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), pp. 93-99.