

“Astounding Inclusion”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

May 5, 2024 - Sixth Sunday of Easter

[Acts 10:44-48; John 15:9-17](#)

Astounded that Holy Spirit would be given by God to the gentiles were Simon Peter and the other Jewish followers of Jesus Christ. Their astonishment is understandable, for prior to this time, the only people who had received the gift of God’s indwelling Spirit were fellow Jewish followers of the way of Jesus. In last Sunday’s lesson from Acts, we heard how a gentile, the treasurer of the queen of Ethiopia, had been welcomed into the family of Jesus-followers through baptism with water, but we heard in today’s story that the welcome of gentiles into the Christian family of faith did not just include their ability to participate in the initiating ritual of baptism with water, but that they could be full recipients of God’s Spirit as well, so they were fully embraced by God and connected to the Divine, just as they were.

Our lesson from Acts of the astounding inclusiveness of God is the conclusion of a scene in which Peter, a devout Jew who carefully followed Jewish dietary laws, receives a vision from God instructing him to eat non-kosher, or unclean, foods. Peter objects, but a heavenly voice tells him, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 10:15). This happened not once, not twice, but three times before Peter really gets the message (which seems to be Peter’s pattern of learning).

Immediately after Peter received this revelation, appearing where he was staying was a delegation of gentiles, messengers of a Roman centurion named Cornelius, who was a God-fearer, meaning a gentile who worshipped the God of Israel, who had also received a vision from God. The message to Cornelius was that he should seek and find Simon Peter and then listen to his message. And so after Cornelius’ servants found Peter and were graciously welcomed by him, even staying the night with him, Peter and a few other Jewish Jesus-followers joined him in returning with Cornelius’ servants to the centurion’s home, which was then filled with Cornelius’ family and friends, who had been invited to come and listen to the message of Peter.

Peter, ever quick to speak, began preaching to the congregation of gentiles the moment he and the delegation of Jesus-followers who were with him arrived at Cornelius' home. Peter told the gathering all about the saving work of Christ, but, as was also often the case with Peter, his speechifying got interrupted by God, whose Spirit descended upon the entire gathering and filled all who were there, as we heard in today's lesson, enabling them to speak in other languages and praise God, just as the Spirit came earlier to the Jewish followers of Jesus at Pentecost and enabled them to speak in other languages and to praise God. The same Spirit, then, filled them all, Jews and gentiles, and enabled them all to do God's work together.

And so the Christian church, from these earliest days as described in the Book of Acts, was to be a diverse but united household of faith, one in which all people, no matter their background, were fully welcomed by God and empowered by God just as they were.

The astounding inclusion of God, which we all enjoy today, still amazes us as we seek to live more perfectly into its promise and to enjoy its benefits. We seek to live together peacefully, abiding together in Christ's self-giving love for us and in our self-giving love for one another, that we might be fruitful, with lives blessed by God's grace that share God's life-changing grace with others.

And yet, it is so hard to love inclusively as God loves us. We too often fall back on the ancient, destructive human practice of considering some people to be too different from us to be part of us, and we decide what is sacred and what is profane, who is an insider and who is an outsider, who is part of the Vine and who is not at all welcome to grow in God's garden with us.

Thanks be to God for continuing to speak to us and, by the Spirit who unites us all, through us to proclaim God's redeeming message of inclusive love. The Wind that filled Peter and other Jewish followers of Jesus and that came upon Cornelius, his family and friends, and the other gentile followers of Jesus still washes over all of us and is blowing throughout the world today, doing new works that include others in God's life-giving love.

I am gladdened today that one of our cousins in faith, the United Methodist Church, the largest mainline protestant denomination in the US, has boldly moved in the direction of inclusion, choosing this week to be more fully welcoming of

LGBTQ people by removing anti-LGBTQ language from their Book of Discipline, allowing openly-LGBTQ people to serve as ordained clergy, and no longer prohibiting same-sex marriages from taking place in their sanctuaries. It is sad that about a quarter of UMC churches, sensing that the winds were blowing in this direction, chose to break away from the church over the last year rather than being part of a more inclusive fellowship that is now joining with other mainline protestant denominations, including ELCA Lutherans, Episcopalians, PCUSA Presbyterians, UCCers, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), in being openly welcoming of LGBTQ people. I pray that God's Spirit would continue to blow over and among us all and move us all to becoming more inclusive, and that Jesus' followers of all kinds would become more open to receiving fresh winds of God and become more committed to finding ways to remain in fellowship with one another even with our differences, for we are all still branches of the one Vine who is Jesus Christ.

I pray that here in this Open and Affirming fellowship we would continue to pay attention to God's still-speaking voice as we are called to go in all kinds of new and unfamiliar directions, that we would leave behind any ways of calling profane that which God shows to be sacred, and that we would more perfectly grow into our commitment to an astounding inclusiveness. Together, as a united and uniting household of faith, may we ever abide in Christ's welcoming love that his joy would be in us and that our joy would be complete. Amen.