

No Partiality
A Sermon on Acts 10:34-48
Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 9, 2021

Introduction

Acts of the Apostles is the story of how the gospel spread from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Today's text is about the beginning of the movement outside Jerusalem.

The lectionary only includes texts from the Acts of the Apostles in the nine Sundays from Easter to Pentecost. Today's lectionary text is five verses at the end of 66 verses about Peter and Cornelius. I didn't read all 66 verses, but I will talk about them today.

First Move: Expanding Beyond Jerusalem

Jesus was a Jew. He lived in Galilee, which was part of ancient Israel. As far as we know, Jesus did most of his preaching in Galilee to Jews and did most of his miracles for Jews. Acts is the story of how Peter and Paul took this preaching to the Gentiles. Luke understands the miraculous growth in the number of Christ followers as an act of God.

The Greek word for Gentiles is ἔθνη. It is the root of the English word *ethnic*. In Greek it means *nations*. For Jews it meant the *other* nations. A Gentile is anyone who is part of an ethnic group that is not Jewish.

Today Peter begins to take the gospel to Gentiles in Israel. Paul calls himself the apostle to the Gentiles, but Acts describes Peter as beginning the mission to the Gentiles.

The gospel begins to spread after the stoning of Stephen in Jerusalem. A severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem. Luke sees the hand of God as using even this persecution to serve God's purposes. The apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. They began to evangelize. Mary last week described Phillip evangelizing to the Ethiopian eunuch on a road in Gaza.

Peter goes to Lydda. It is about 30 miles northwest of Jerusalem. He continues doing the some of the same miracles as Jesus. Peter is empowered by the same Spirit that empowered Jesus.

Peter comes across a man named Aeneas who is paralyzed; he has been bedridden for eight years. Peter tells him, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed.” Immediately he got up and the people were amazed. All the residents of Lydda turned to the Lord.

Joppa is about 13 miles northwest of Lydda. A female disciple in Joppa died; her name was Tabitha. This is the only reference in the New Testament to a woman as a disciple. Two other disciples in Joppa heard that Peter was in Lydda. They went to Peter and asked him to come with them. Peter went with the disciples to the house where Tabitha’s body was lying on a bed. Peter knelt down and prayed and said, “Tabitha, get up.” She opened her eyes and sat up. Peter took her hand and helped her out of bed. Many more people in Joppa heard about this miracle and believed in the Lord.

Further up the coast is Caesarea Maritima, which was the home of the Roman government in Judea. A Roman centurion named Cornelius is stationed there. A centurion is an officer in the Roman army who commanded 100 soldiers. Cornelius was a God-fearer, which was a Gentile who regularly attended the synagogue and offered financial support to the synagogue but who did not convert to Judaism. He gave generously to the poor and he prayed constantly.

Cornelius is praying in his home and he has a vision, similar to the vision that Paul had on Damascus Road. An angel says to him, “Cornelius.” He stares at the angel in terror and says, “What is it, Lord?” The angel says, “God has noticed your prayers and your alms. Now send men to Joppa and look for Peter; he is staying with Simon, a tanner, whose home is by the seaside.” Cornelius called two of his slaves and a devout soldier who served under him. After telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

While the three men sent by Cornelius are on their journey, Peter is on the roof of a home in Joppa, praying. He is hungry; apparently he is fasting. Peter has his own vision. He sees heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In the sheet were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. This is the same list of animals that appears in Genesis 1. Then Peter heard a voice, saying, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” Peter says, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” Peter was a Jew; he kept kosher. The voice says to him, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” This happens three times, and the sheet is suddenly taken up to heaven.

While Peter is reflecting on the vision and trying to make sense of it, the three men from Cornelius arrive at the gate of the house where Peter is staying. Normally

Jews would not receive Gentiles at their homes, but the Spirit says to him, “Behold, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.” So Peter goes down to the men. They say to him, “Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.” So Peter invited the Gentiles to come in and he offers them hospitality.

The next day, the three men take Peter and some of the faithful from Joppa back to Cornelius. Cornelius is expecting them; he had called together his relatives and close friends. Cornelius receives Peter in his home. Cornelius and Peter tell each other about the visions they had. Peter now understands his vision about clean and unclean animals as a metaphor for bringing clean and unclean people into the movement. It is a sign that God wants him to begin preaching to Gentiles, instead of preaching only to Jews.

Second Move: You Are Accepted

Then Peter delivers a sermon that is on the lectionary each year on Easter Sunday. It is the first part of the Scripture that I read. It is a condensed version of the Gospel. Peter tells about the important things about Jesus in a few verses.

Peter says that he now understands that God does not show partiality. Partiality is a translation of the Greek word, *προσωπολήμπτης*. This is a common word in the Old Testament, but this is the only place it appears in the New Testament. It means one who lifts up a face. It is a compound word: face and take up or lift up. It was traditional in the ancient near East for a gentleman to greet another gentleman by bowing down to him. If the gentleman who is standing takes the face of the gentleman who is bowing and lifts it up, this is a sign of recognition and esteem. In the Old Testament it is used most often in the courtroom. A judge is not to lift up anyone’s face above the faces of others. The judge is supposed to render impartial justice. With God, it is sometimes translated as God is no respecter of persons. Everyone is equal in the eyes of God. Each of us is a child of God, but none of us is entitled to presume that God favors any of us over another person.

Peter says that God accepts every person in every ethnic group who fears him and carries out righteousness. The Greek word for accept is *δεκτὸς*. It also means pleases or welcomes. You are pleasing to God and you are welcomed by God if you fear God and do righteousness. In the Gospel of Luke, righteousness usually means giving to the poor and praying. Cornelius is described as righteous because he gives generously to the poor and prays often.

Peter says that the this good news was taken to all of Judea by Jesus Christ. A central concern of Luke-Acts is to show that God was faithful to God's promises to the Jews. If the apostles are going to evangelize to Gentiles, they need to explain why so many Jews have rejected Christ. Why should the Gentiles accept Christ if God has been unfaithful to the Jews? Acts repeatedly shows that Peter and Paul go first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.

Peter says that Jesus is Lord of all. Jesus is Lord not only of Israel but of all people. God anointed Jesus as Lord, but instead of smearing him with oil, God smeared him with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit gave Jesus the power to heal people.

Peter says that *they* did away with Jesus by hanging him on a tree, but God raised Jesus from the dead on the third day. God then directed the apostles, who were witnesses to all these things, to preach to the people and testify that Jesus has been designated by God as judge of the living and the dead. Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

After Peter's sermon the gift of the holy spirit is poured out on the Gentiles. The Gentiles were speaking in tongues and magnifying God. *Magnify* is the same verb that Luke uses in the Magnificat, when Mary, the mother of Jesus, responds to the visit from the angel Gabriel by saying, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

The spirit is poured out on the Gentiles *before* they are baptized. A Roman centurion is the last person you would think would embrace the good news of peace. The circumcised faithful who traveled with Peter are amazed. The Greek verb for amaze also means being driven out of one's mind. They didn't know what to make of it.

Then Peter explains the meaning of it. "Is anyone able to refuse the water for every one of those to be baptized who received the holy spirit just as we [did]?" Peter commands that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then Cornelius and his friends offer hospitality to Peter and the circumcised faithful; they invite them to stay with them several days. They are the first Gentiles to be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

This is the great turning point in the spread of the good news. Gentiles have their own Pentecost and the spirit is poured out on them. The rest of the Acts of the Apostles is about the mission to the Gentiles.

Third Move: Accepting Yourself and Others

There is a balance that we need to strike. We are accepted by God, but God shows no partiality. We are beloved children of God, but so is everyone else. Paul says that Jews have their own path to God through the law, Christians have their path

to God through Jesus. Your enemy is not the enemy of God. Your favored group is not favored by God over other groups.

Baptism is like resurrection for each one of us. To be baptized is to die to your old way of living. When you come up out of the water, you share in the same resurrection as Jesus. You are a new person. Our Scripture today says that you are released from your sins when you are baptized, not when you die.

One of the primary meanings of sin in the Bible is something that separates us from God. We turn away from God and turn toward other things instead.

Sin is not a word that we use much today in everyday speech. A word that we use more often than sin that means something similar is shame. Shame separates us from God and from other people.

When we are ashamed, we believe that we aren't good enough. We don't fit in. We may even stop loving ourselves because of shame. You may be ashamed when you are young because your teeth aren't straight, or because you're not good at spelling or multiplication, or because you're not a good athlete.

As you get older, you get ashamed by other things. Young adults are ashamed if they don't make enough money or if they are single and not dating someone who is good-looking and smart. Some people are ashamed when they realize they are gay; they worry that straight people will think they are disgusting.

When you get to be my age, you may be ashamed if you have been divorced. It makes you feel like a failure. You are ashamed if you have a lot of debt. It makes you think you are irresponsible with money. You get so busy that you don't have time to exercise and you feel ashamed about being overweight. Some people drink too much or take drugs. They are medicating themselves with alcohol and drugs because they are ashamed of something about themselves.

As you get into your senior years, you may be ashamed that your body is falling apart. You can't do the things you used to do. You don't work anymore and you don't feel useful. Your mind starts to slip and you forget things. You may even be ashamed of your children. You tried hard to be a good parent but your kids didn't turn out well.

Shame is like a wall that separates us from other people. We tell ourselves that we're no good and that people won't like us if they knew about the things we are ashamed of.

We project that shame onto other people. People engaged in partisan politics say that the other group lacks principles and is only concerned with power. They have no vision of the common good. We may be expressing our fears about ourselves.

Being baptized gets us out of jail free. We can let our shame go. God knows everything about us and God accepts us, just as we are. You don't have to be perfect; you can just be you.

Paul Tillich was one of the great theologians of the last hundred years. His greatest sermon was called, *You Are Accepted*. He preached it on today's text. Tillich says that the moment when we no longer feel separated from God is like a wave of light breaking into our darkness. You have a vision like Peter and Cornelius. It is as though a voice is saying, "You are accepted."

We are overwhelmed because we are accepted by something that is greater than us. Do not ask why. Maybe you will understand later. Do not do anything now. Maybe later you will do much. Do not seek. Do not do. Do not intend. Simply accept that you are accepted. That is the moment of your salvation. That frees you to be yourself. You can love yourself instead of hating yourself and hating other people. It frees you to be part of the group and to be confident that you will fit in.

It doesn't give us permission to demonize other people. That is something we can and should feel guilty about. Guilt is different from shame; guilt can be a good thing. Guilt means we feel sorry when we have messed up. Shame is different. Shame, at least in the way I am talking about it today, is about things that we can't change about ourselves. God made each of us; God is pleased with us just as we are. God still expects us to respect God and do righteous things.

One of the righteous things is giving to the poor. Helping the poor shows that you accept other people who are less fortunate than you.

Another righteous thing is praying. When we pray to God, we should tell God what is bothering us. Just naming our problems and telling someone else about them lifts a great burden off us. We should pray for other people who are suffering. That extends God's circle of care outward.

We feel God's acceptance when we are part of a church. In churches at their best, people accept us for who we are. God has accepted each of us, so we accept each other.

We accept people regardless of how much or how little money they have. We accept people even if their skin is a different color from ours. We accept people even if they grew up in a different part of the world and they do things that seem strange to us.

We rejoice that people are different from us. They add richness and depth to our community.

Conclusion

Peter takes the good news to Gentiles. He heals the breach between Jews and Gentiles. In Christ Jesus, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. All are accepted.

God accepts us, and God expects us to accept others.

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