

Sermon: Chosen

New North Church, Hingham

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6 May 2018

Based on **Acts 10:44-48, John 15:9-17**

As we get further away from the Resurrection, we get closer to the birth of the church. Today's reading from the Book of Acts jumps way ahead of the story in a chronological sense but it ties in nicely with the passage from John's Gospel.

First, a word about the Book of Acts. Early church tradition attributes this book to Luke, making it a companion volume to his Gospel, which we could call the Book of the Acts of Jesus. The full name for this second volume is the Book of the Acts of the Apostles but it wouldn't be out of line to call it the Book of the Acts of the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit seems to drive all the action here, while the apostles just go where they are called.

The best stories usually begin with some conflict in order to engage the reader and to move the story along, and chapter 10 in Acts introduces a conflict that won't be resolved until chapter 15, and the resolution helps explain the expansion of the Christian mission beyond the boundaries of Judaism.

The issue was that the early church was an obscure sect known mostly only to Jews, even though Jesus' ministry had reached out to Samaritans and to a few Gentile areas around Galilee. Apostles such as Paul had begun to spread the Word north to Syria, as far east as India and as far west as Rome. But the events of chapter 10 ignited a debate which wasn't resolved until chapter 15 when a special Council decided, unanimously, to open the church to everyone: Jews, Gentiles, Greeks, Romans, foreigners, you name it (15:28), and that decision changed everything.

Chapter 10 is the story of two visions and two transformations.

As the leader of the apostles, Peter's ministry was always only to the Jews in Jerusalem. Other apostles had taken the message to Jews living elsewhere, to Antioch, Athens, Corinth, and so on. But Cornelius, a Roman centurion – and a God-fearin' man – living in Caesarea, had a vision one day at about three o'clock; Luke gives us lots of details. Cornelius was told to send for a man called Peter, who was living in Joppa, about thirty-five miles south along the coast.

At about noon the next day, Peter also had a vision while he was at prayer. His vision was food-related, and he couldn't figure it out at first. While Cornelius waited for Peter, he called together his relatives and close friends, all Gentiles, and Peter gathered together some believers, all Jews, to travel with him. When Peter got to Cornelius' house, he said to them, "*You yourselves* know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean" (10:28). By unlawful, Peter meant, in the eyes of the religious authorities in Jerusalem. And yet, Cornelius sent for Peter and Peter went. During their conversation, the meaning of his vision finally hit him, and Peter said to Cornelius: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality" (10:34).

Up to this moment, this small Jewish sect had had no diversity, no inclusiveness, and no issues other than trying to get other Jews to follow along with them, which wasn't as easy as it looked. Now, by crossing a cultural boundary, Peter had the opportunity to expand the church in ways no one had ever thought about before, and it would cause problems back in Jerusalem.

For today, notice that it is the Holy Spirit at work here. Peter wasn't quite blue in the face, but he was still speaking his blah blah blah when "*the Holy Spirit* fell upon all who heard the word" (10:44), not from anything Peter said but as the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out "even on the Gentiles." Peter understood this immediately and ordered everyone to be baptized right then and there, and they were.

Had the Holy Spirit not intervened, we don't know what Peter might have done. He might have kept talking for a few more hours and then left for home. In John's Gospel, Jesus gave the disciples his new commandment, to love one another, and he could very well have meant for Jews to love Gentiles and for Gentiles to love Jews. Jesus also said, "You did not choose me but I chose you" (10:16), without knowing anything about them in advance, just as the Holy Spirit chose Cornelius, a God-fearin' man.

Cornelius' conversion, and Peter's acceptance of it, was a radical development. Peter had to choose between either obeying the law or God's voice. He couldn't do both. He chose to follow the Spirit's guidance and came to a new truth about God's intentions.

Some of you may know that I am part of the Hingham Hull Interfaith Religious Leaders Association. We had our monthly lunch meeting last week at Wellspring in Hull – we'll be here at New North next month. As part of what we do, we go around the table and offer brief updates since the last meeting.

Brother Dan Walter from Glastonbury Abbey mentioned that they had just received a grant which will enable the monastery to renovate eight bedrooms, with everyone now getting their own bathroom. Dan remarked that Benedict must be rolling around in his grave and complaining, “This isn’t what I had mind.” Benedict knew what a monk’s life should be like, and indoor plumbing had no place in it.

In 1536, Jews in Portugal were forced to formally vow allegiance to the church or leave. Those who converted became known as the “New Christians,” *conversos*. Within themselves, they remained Jews and practiced their faith in secret while looking like Christians on the outside. It was an open secret, and everyone knew who the Jews were. It did have the effect of keeping the peace, so that was good in its own way.

But how do you remain Jewish when you’re supposed to eat pork like all the other Christians did? For one thing, you learn to make sausage in a new way. They came up with something called *alheira*, which comes from the Portuguese word for garlic, *alho*. *Alheira* includes bread crumbs, garlic, and mountain herbs. It looked like the pork sausage commonly seen hanging in front of Christian homes and so it was also hung outside Jewish homes. But instead of pork, *alheira* used game: chicken, duck, quail, or any other kosher meat.

We have to wonder if that’s what Moses had in mind. Far from crossing a cultural boundary, as Peter did, the Jews in Portugal actually hid within the culture. To this day, even though Jews are again welcome in Portugal, they still make *alheira* because ‘it feels like part of the religion.’¹

What does God care if monks have indoor plumbing or not? St. Benedict might have thought it was a *great* idea, had it been an option at the time. The Jews of Portugal had no interest in converting to Christianity, but they were fond of staying alive. Inventing a new food item was a clever way to blend in and carry on. How would the Holy Spirit feel about that?

The Holy Spirit can be – and perhaps is *supposed* to be – disruptive. Rosemary Radford Ruether, who is a church historian and a prolific author, says the church must do two things: it must pass on the tradition from one generation to another, and to be open to the Holy Spirit doing new things to inspire each generation.

Sometimes those two things butt heads. We get used to the way things are and we resist change. But Peter learned a surprising lesson when he saw the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out ‘even on the Gentiles.’ He followed God’s vision across a threshold and into a household that

was waiting for him to take them in. God gave Peter and Cornelius visions in order for them both to see the world differently, and to meet in the middle.

Just as the Spirit guides the church into the world, love guides us into community. When Jesus said, ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another,’ he didn’t make it optional. Jesus’ love is transformative. It’s for any who call him friend. His love gives us a solidarity that we share at the Lord’s Table, and it gives us the strength and confidence to face the conflicting realities of daily life.

God sought us out and chose us and gathered us into a faith community. Jesus said now go and bear fruit. So, let’s move ahead and do that, however the Spirit moves us.

Amen.

¹ <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/254237/history-of-inquisition-in-a-sausage> accessed 4 May 2018.