

Sermon: Abide in Love

New North Church

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

Today's readings make it seem as if we were dropped in the middle of something, which we were, so let's take them one at a time.

The passage from Acts is the middle part of the time when Peter met Cornelius, and, as we heard, it is a conversion story. Luke tells us that Cornelius 'was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God' (Acts 10:2). So far, so good, except that Cornelius was a Gentile *and* a Roman centurion. He was pretty much the last person that Peter ever expected would reach out to him. But when an angel of the LORD commanded Cornelius to send for Peter, he did it without question.

And at Peter's end, when three men sent by a centurion come to get you, you invite them in, offer them hospitality, and a place to rest, which Peter did. The next day, he and some friends went with the three men to see what was up with the centurion.

When they arrived, Cornelius, described as an upright and God-fearing man, greeted them, and told Peter about his vision of the angel. Therefore, he said, 'I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the LORD has commanded you to say' (10:33).

That's when Peter realized that God shows no partiality, and that anyone who worships God and does what is right is acceptable to God. Then he proclaimed the gospel to Cornelius, along with his relatives and close friends (10:24).

Something prompted Cornelius to seek out Peter to hear the gospel about Jesus. Maybe being an upright and God-fearing Gentile was enough to cause the Holy Spirit to visit him and get the ball rolling with Peter. This is the Book of Acts, after all.

When Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit,' he echoed the words of the Ethiopian court official who also wanted to be baptized, saying to Philip, 'Who can stop me?'

In John's Gospel, Jesus said, 'You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit,' which is exactly what Peter and Philip ended up doing *even though* it was the furthest thing from their respective minds at the time.

And what did Peter's high-level outreach to Cornelius get him? A healthy ration of criticism when he returned to Jerusalem. What the church leaders there wanted to know was, why did he go to a Gentiles' house *and eat with them*? That was their concern – that Peter ate the same food as the Gentiles did, in their house.

No mention of Peter proclaiming the gospel or even of baptizing a whole crowd of people. The church's mindset was to keep Gentiles out and only Jewish Christ followers in. So, Peter told them the whole story – it's in chapter 11 – and ended his long explanation by saying, 'If then God gave *them* the same gift that he gave *us* when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?'

For that, they had no comment. They thought about it, and then 'they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."'

Originally seen as an exception to the missionary movement, the events at Cornelius' house changed everything for the early church. The realization that God's judgement did not depend on your being either a Jew or a Gentile altered perceptions. The church began to grow – really grow – once the word got out that God accepted anyone who worshipped God and who dealt justly with others.

Cornelius and the Ethiopian went looking for Jesus and they found love and joy and gave love and thanksgiving in return.

Not everyone loves God and that's okay. Everyone has their house gods, the things they worship and adore over everything else. One can deal justly with others, feed the hungry, and so on, and never stop to thank God for giving them that spark of initiative to do these things. That's fine; God knows you're doing the work.

But if you're the type of person who feels compelled to dictate to others how *their* lives will be ordered, then you have no room for God in your heart, and no love for those you want to control. Things never end well in those situations because the desire for freedom of worship – and freedom in general – has always been strong in people.

So, let's say you're somewhere in the middle. You worship God and you have no problem letting people live their lives if they keep the noise down and don't bother you.

But our prejudices are deeply entrenched. From the time Cain murdered Abel right up to now, history is littered with examples of people hating people and killing them either out of fear, or because they were perceived to be different, or they were in the way.

Just thirty years ago in Rwanda during a politically motivated civil war, hundreds of thousands were killed for no good reason. Most of the victims were killed in their own villages or towns, many by their neighbors and fellow villagers. Gangs searched for victims hiding in churches and school buildings. Militias did the rest.¹

The fighting spilled over into what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It became an international incident and many who were sent to keep the peace also died.

When God is rejected or no longer present, bad things happen. For this reason, Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another in contrast to the world's hatred, and to counteract it.

The love that Jesus spoke about is not an emotional sort of love, but an ethical, almost metaphysical love. A hundred years ago, a German theologian named Dibelius defined it as 'a unity of being by virtue of a divine quality.'² For John, love is related to abiding in Jesus.

There is joy too, in our union with Christ, and it is fulfilled in continuing Jesus' mission and in our bearing fruit on the vine.

From today's readings, we know that God's judgement is for everyone. The Holy Spirit commanded Philip to go to the Ethiopian who wanted to know more about Jesus, and he baptized him. The Holy Spirit commanded Peter to go to Cornelius' house, where a crowd had gathered to hear what Peter had to say about Jesus, and they were all baptized into life with Christ.

There's commonality in these stories, and the lesson – which is good news for everyone – that if you have a desire to know God, the Holy Spirit will make it happen one way or another. Seek and ye shall find. And no one can stop you.

Amen.

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¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rwandan_genocide

² Dibelius, M., "John 15:13. Eine Studie zum Traditionsproblem des Johannes-evangeliums," in *Festgabe für Adolph Deismann zum 60. Geburtstag* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1927), 174.