

Sermon - 09-05-17, Easter 6, Year B
Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-1; John 16:16-24

Peter and the others witness the Holy Spirit coming upon the Gentile converts. Peter, in his meditation on what it was to be a person of God, had come to a deeper understanding of God's grace and God's plan for all humankind. (That passage about God offering Peter a smorgasbord of all the unclean animals is from the beginning of chapter 10 of Acts.) He was less surprised than the others, who were astounded that God should act with such acceptance for Gentiles, who were not of the tribe of Israel, were not a part of God's chosen people. Yet it seemed that, in fact, they were. Chosen by God, and blessed by God, they were given the gift of that intimate relationship with the Creator of the Universe which the early church had experienced and proclaimed at Pentecost, and which is God's gift to us, too, in our Christian lives.

This is a paradigm shift for the church. With God's revelation to Peter, and with the incontrovertible proof of the gift of the Spirit which the circumcised believers recognized from their own experience, suddenly God's salvation is open to all. Just as Paul worked tirelessly as an Apostle to the Gentiles, so Peter - more clearly established in and recognized by the leaders and decision-makers of the church in Jerusalem - is led to acknowledge the Gentiles, the outsiders and foreigners, as sharing in the salvation history of Israel, as it is made perfect in the person and work of Jesus.

"Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" asks Peter. In doing so, he recognizes that the witness of God is greater than any human witness. He takes the risk of forgoing a cherished way of viewing the world in order to follow a God who is much greater than any human construct. We shouldn't be surprised at this. After all, he had plenty of practice - what with all the time he spent with Jesus ... and all the anguish he experienced in the collapse of his own self-image, on the day he denied his Saviour.

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Suddenly, for those who are God's people, the world is smaller, more intimate. Suddenly there is no luxury of saying "us" and "them" Suddenly the work of the faith community is not in standing in opposition but rather in solidarity, not in "teaching them a lesson" but rather in longing with mind and heart for the well-being of all whom we meet, all who are created in the image of the Creator.

A daunting prospect, to love the world and all who are in it. Still more daunting, when we realize that we are to love God first and best - remembering what our reading from the First Letter of John said last week about not being able to love God if we cannot love brother and sister. A daunting prospect indeed - and the history of the church is full of the agonized struggles to live out Christ's commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you." Full of the struggles, and full of the failures - and fuller than full of the grace and forgiveness of God, and the calling and recalling of God's people as successive generations are called to the service of God and the sweetness of salvation, as single lives are shaped and reshaped by God's grace and loving-kindness.

We are to love. We are to accept. We are to serve. We are to rejoice. And we might as well be prepared to be mightily surprised by a God who, even now, has not revealed all the fullness of God's grace and God's plan for the world and all who are in it.

The Lord be with you.