

**THE DAY WE WERE SAVED**  
Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton  
May 6, 2007  
Scripture: Psalm 148; Acts 11:1-18

The problem with the Holy Spirit is that you can't control it. It blows where it will, and we do not know from whence it came or where it's going next. Most of us like our church fairly predictable. We don't like a lot of fiddling around with the order of the service, for instance. If the hymn comes in the wrong place or a prayer is moved somewhere in the liturgy, it can be very disconcerting.

And people get into a routine as to where they sit. Always the same place every Sunday. Woe to the stranger who accidentally sits in the favorite pew of someone who has warmed the same cushion every Sunday for the past forty years!

There is a story that one such couple, an elderly member and his wife who used to make their way down here each week from the upper east side expected to find their pew empty and waiting for them. Evidently on the Sunday in question, they arrived a little bit late and found that someone else was occupying their spot. When they reported this violation to the nearest usher and saw no immediate action to remove the interlopers they simply turned on their heels and went back home. After all, you can't worship in an unfamiliar place.

All of that is minor in comparison to the change that was sweeping through the early church as the community of God's people began moving from the synagogue to the sanctuary. We forget that in its earliest days, Christianity was not known by that name, Christian. The faith of those first followers of Jesus was simply called the Way. And the earliest of worship was in the synagogue, because the Way was considered a messianic movement within Judaism. It wasn't until Antioch that the name Christian was associated with the followers of Jesus.

It was inevitable, however, that Christianity would break beyond the boundaries of Judaism and include the Gentiles. During his lifetime, Jesus had preached to Jew and Gentile alike. His healing miracles embraced Gentiles, like Jarius' daughter, or the Gerasene demoniac. His stories made heroes of outcasts, like the good Samaritan which defied the narrow definitions of Judaism. And when he advised how to lead a good life, his teaching embraced surprising people. He advised Quisling tax collectors not to collect more than their due, and Roman Gentile soldiers not to coerce people by force. No faithful Jew had ever considered the possibility that Samaritans, tax collectors, or soldiers could live a godly life.

Following the resurrection, with a sense of the presence of the risen Lord in the early church, Jesus' barrier breaking began to unite people in a way that astounded the Jewish traditionalists of the early church. It all came to a head in the book of Acts, in Chapters 10 and 11 when a series of events changed everything and bridged differences that had been present since the first anyone knew of what God wanted of us.

Ask a Jew of Jesus' time what one must do to lead a righteous life and likely you would hear about rituals, sacrifices, and observances. A male child was to be

circumcised on the eighth day of life as a sign of the covenant with Abraham. Boys were trained in the law, and prepared to accept the responsibilities of adulthood in the synagogue. The commandments and covenants had to be mastered, the prescribed means and ways of remaining ritually clean. 613 laws to be learned and observed such as the purification of women in a mikvah bath following their monthly cycle, a purification necessary before returning to the temple.

Sacrifices were made for certain kinds of sin, or in celebration of certain feasts. You do not touch the dead without ritually cleansing yourself. You do not come in contact with those who have skin lesions, like leprosy. You do not eat meat from animals with cloven hooves like pork. You do not divorce without good reason, and divorce was decidedly sexist by today's standards, in that only a man could divorce a woman, and the justification of that bill of divorce could be for nothing more than the inability to bear children.

The Judaism of Jesus' day was a tight system bearing a cultural, social, and religious heritage and it did not include outsiders like pagan Gentiles. Gentiles, after all, were unclean, uncircumcised, uneducated in the faith, the law, and the prophets. They may have shared a common land, but that is all they shared, and the cultural and religious gulf between them might as well have been an ocean.

Then in the book of Acts in a fast moving sequence of events, Peter goes to Caesarea, a Roman port city, where he stays with a Gentile man, a Roman Centurion by the name of Cornelius. There in Caesarea Peter shared the gospel, the story of Jesus, his life and teaching, his death and resurrection, and when he did, Luke tells us the Holy Spirit fell upon them, these unclean Gentiles, all those who heard what Peter was saying. And when the Jews saw this, they were astounded that the Holy Spirit was doing what it was doing.

It was such a powerful moment that Peter asked, if there was any reason why the water of baptism should be withheld from those whom the Holy Spirit had already blessed? And hearing no opposition, Peter ordered that they be baptized.

It's at that point that the lesson today begins. When the Jews back in Judea, especially in Jerusalem, heard that Peter had been running around baptizing Gentiles, they were furious. They even sent emissaries to Peter to challenge him for doing this, but Peter told them about a vision he had had in which he saw a sheet coming down from heaven with four footed animals, beasts and reptiles and birds and a voice that ordered him to kill and eat. Nothing any longer would be profane or unclean.

And when Peter had finished explaining all this to the emissaries, they fell silent, and looked at one another, and no doubt thought about all of it for a very long moment, and then they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to eternal life." And with that declaration, centuries of history fell away like scales no longer needed.

I know this probably doesn't sound like much. Or maybe it sounds like an odd historical footnote, interesting but mostly irrelevant to us. But nothing could be farther from the truth. In reality, this is the story of the day we were saved. The day that the

ancient barriers were broken down and we were included in the embrace of God's salvation.

Prior to Peter's sojourn in Caesarea, you and I were being kept on the outside. We are, after all, most of us are genetic and geographic heirs of the Gentiles and not of the Jews. We think of ourselves from a faith perspective as being more or less indigenous as if we and our families have always been Christian. Mom might have been an Episcopalian, and Dad a Baptist, but we never think of ourselves as not having some Christian roots. Most of our forebears were Gentiles. To Jews today we still are.

The story of the work of the Holy Spirit moving among God's people in Caesarea through the ministry of Peter, is the story of that point at which we were saved, because it was there, in Caesarea, that being either Jew or Gentile became of no consequence, for all of us might be baptized and become a part of the community of faith drawn together by the Spirit's tether.

Reinhold Niebuhr, the great social ethicist and theologian of the last century was once asked if he was saved by a very eager seminarian. Niebuhr said he was. But his inquisitor, eager to press the point, inquired further, "But Dr. Niebuhr, *when* were you saved?" Realizing that the young man was looking for a day and an hour in Niebuhr's life that he could claim as his time of salvation, the great ethicist responded, "I was saved on a cross on a dusty hill outside of the city walls of Jerusalem, 2000 years ago."

I have always found that answer rather useful when Jehovah's Witnesses and overly enthusiastic evangelicals press me for a similar answer. But in something of the same vein, we might also refer to Acts 11:1-18 as the story of our salvation, that time in God's good time that faith was offered to the world, and moved beyond the limited confines of the Judaism of Jesus' time.

The church that was called into being by the Spirit's movement, embracing the outsider and those considered unacceptable is the call that continues to be ours today.

The church has always struggled with which image it is most comfortable, Virgin Mother Pure unsullied and unstained, or Earth Mother gathering her wayward children to her skirts. In the one image no eye is pure enough to see God, no tongue clean enough to speak God's name. The church of the Virgin Pure is vigilant. She covers her children's ears and holds their hands, to keep them from seeing or touching the world's impurity. Its clergy are a model to the flock in morality, goodness, and self-control.

In the church of the Earth Mother the dirty hands and unwashed faces of her children are her delight. She marvels and revels in their liveliness. "I am come that you might have life," Jesus said, "and that you might have it abundantly." Her children gather to her like Ma Kettle's kids come in from the barnyard, frogs in their pockets and grass stains on their jeans. What they lack in cleanliness they more than make up in joy.

Of course, no one church is either/or. All churches are a mixture of that to which we aspire and that with which we settle. Christians are neither all heaven nor all earth, but a wondrous mixture of dust and glory, which is why churches are less like sterile operating rooms scrubbed and sanitized for elective surgery and more like MASH units where the wounded souls and spirits of what is left of humanity are rolled in for emergency treatment.

The situation of the twenty first century church is not that different from the story of the first century church in Jerusalem where Peter witnessed the amazing love of God set loose by the Holy Spirit. Today we struggle to maintain a holy community in the church where the glory of God can shine brightly in the lives of God's humble servants. But we do so realizing that we are earthen vessels, and that strive as we may, we are always human and not all holy.

In the first century the dividing line between exclusionary holiness and holy hospitality was circumcision, dietary laws, and ritual observance. Today there are other barriers; divorce, homosexuality, gay marriage, our relationship with other religious expressions in the world. Today's fixations are not exactly the issues that divided at Chalcedon or Nicaea or even in Jerusalem but they are the points of entry God has given us to work out our salvation today with fear and trembling.

It would have been so much easier if the Spirit had left well enough alone, and not blown where it did showing Peter the wider dimensions of a gospel meant for all people, both clean and unclean. But the Spirit is a spirit of Love and cannot resist drawing disparate elements together.

That Holy Spirit has a broader vision of the future and a greater hope for our humanity than we have ever imagined, a vision articulated by the psalmist of that 148<sup>th</sup> Psalm, who sings of a time when all the earth and all created things shall praise the Lord.

Angels praise him, sun and moon, sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, kings and peoples... all of us praise the Lord. A church like that is not one of our creation, but one of God's, a church that gathers at a table, frogs in pockets, grass stains on our jeans, not always sure how to say grace, but welcome at the table nonetheless, where the host invites us not because we are worthy, but because we are loved. That is what gets us here. And that is what keeps us here.

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