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Can You Believe This? Acts 10:44-48

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles,⁴⁶ for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said,⁴⁷ “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”⁴⁸ So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

Today’s story is about ***believing the almost unbelievable***.
Especially when it comes to the power of the ***Holy Spirit***.

We don’t talk about the ***Holy Spirit*** enough in the Presbyterian church,
and yet it’s just as important in the Trinity,
as God the Father and the Son, the Creator and Redeemer.
In fact, the Holy Spirit was the ***gift Jesus gave*** us when he left this earth.
And it was the Holy Spirit that began
what we now know as the church at ***Pentecost***.
Today’s story is a ***continuation*** of that movement of the Holy Spirit in the
world, always working to expand the kingdom of God.

We do believe in the ***power of the Holy Spirit*** in our theology.
We have a phrase in our denomination,
reformed and always reforming, according to the power of the Holy Spirit.
It means we cannot stay still, or allow ourselves to get stagnant.
God is still speaking and acting through the Holy Spirit, right in our midst.
It’s like the ***wind*** that blows—you can’t see it,
but you sure can see and feel the effects of the God’s Spirit.

Today’s story starts at the ***beginning of Acts 10***,
when Cornelius, a Roman Centurion, a Gentile, a non-Jew, had a ***vision***.
This centurion was not a typical one,
for he feared God (as in reverence), he prayed,
and he gave alms generously to those in need.

Acts 10 says: *One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius."* ⁴ *He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God."* ⁵ **Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter;** ⁶ *he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside."*

And that's exactly what Cornelius did—he sent people to Joppa, and they brought Peter back with them, because while Cornelius was having his vision about summoning Peter, **Peter was having a vision** of his own.

Peter was an upright Jewish man, following all of God's laws, including the many dietary restrictions that Jews followed. But he had a vision, when he went up on the roof to pray. Listen to Acts 10:10:

¹⁰ *He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a **trance**.* ¹¹ *He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners.* ¹² *In it were **all kinds of four-footed creatures** and reptiles and birds of the air.* ¹³ *Then he heard a voice saying, "**Get up, Peter; kill and eat.**"* ¹⁴ *But Peter said, "**By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.**"* ¹⁵ *The voice said to him again, a second time, "**What God has made clean, you must not call profane.**"* ¹⁶ *This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.*

Peter was **trying to make sense** of it when the men came from Cornelius' home, asking him to come back to Caesarea.

Peter invites them in, and Acts says,

The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers ^[c] *from Joppa accompanied him.* ²⁴ *The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends.* ²⁵ *On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him.* ²⁶ *But Peter made him get up, saying, "Stand up; I am only a mortal."* ²⁷ *And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled;* ²⁸ *and 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.**"* ²⁹ *So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?"*

This is when Cornelius tells Peter about his vision, and then says:
*Therefore 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."*

So Peter begins to preach to them,
 and he offers a **sermon** to them,
 summing up the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
 While he was still speaking, the **Holy Spirit descends** upon the Gentile
 believers and just like the Pentecost story in Acts 2,
 when the Jews in Jerusalem starting speaking in different languages—
 these Gentiles start speaking in **tongues, and praising God!**

And the Jews can't believe what they are seeing,
 but they **know it is the Holy Spirit!**
*So Peter says ⁴⁷ "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who
 have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" ⁴⁸ So he ordered them to be
baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.*

Isn't that a **wild and amazing** story?
 Two guys having powerful **visions** at the same time,
 And the Spirit doing a completely **new thing!**

It reminds us how **powerful and amazing** the Holy Spirit really is,
 how challenging the Spirit can be,
 how surprising, and shocking!

And yet, it **shouldn't shock us** to see and hear the Holy Spirit
 acting in this way—being poured out upon new people—
 because in John 3 we hear Jesus say that God sent his only Son
 to redeem the world.
 Not just a few people, not just Jews, but the **whole world.**

But, we don't live in the whole world.
 We live in **our corner** of the world, right?
 And usually our little corner of the world is **comfortable and familiar**, right?

Do you have a **favorite** restaurant?

Do you usually order the same thing?
 If I go to IHOP I want the Belgian waffle combo, with bacon & scrambled eggs.
 Pretty much every time I'm there.

Do you have a favorite way you drive to work? Or church?
 A favorite gas station?
 I love Quik Trip, and I drive the same way here almost every time!

Don't you have a favorite grocery store?
 And certain items that are always on your list?
 We use the online grocery ordering,
 and there's even a category called—you guessed it---***my favorites***.
 So we can quickly order what we usually order.

It's just ***human nature to stick with what's familiar***.
 To stay in our comfort zones.
 Because life is crazy and chaotic,
 and having the familiar makes us feel more ***safe, more at ease***,
 more in control of our world,
 and who doesn't want that?

It's also human nature to have ***boundary lines***,
 To identify with people like us.
 We raise our kids to identify with our family, our people.

But in Acts 10—we see that our God is about
breaking down boundaries and barriers,
breaking through what is comfortable and familiar
 And ***opening wide*** the doors of the kingdom of God!

Peter's vision, about no food being unclean,
 It opened the door for him to see that ***no PERSON*** is unclean.
 Jews didn't associate with non-Jews.
 But right here we see the Holy Spirit breaking down that barrier!

What are the barriers ***in our hearts***?
 What are the boundary lines that we observe in our lives?
 Where are our comfort zones?

And where might God be breaking down those barriers?

We all tend to ***hang out with people*** who look and think like us, don't we?
In fact, most of our time is spent with similar people.
Because it's easy, comfortable, familiar, right?

Most of you know that I am the ***only woman senior pastor*** in Owasso.
And so when I go to Pastors' meetings in town, it's me, and a lot of men.
Which isn't always easy, much less comfortable.
But I have something to learn from people who may not even allow women
to minister in their tradition,
and I believe that they have something to learn from me as well.
It's good for us to be with people who do not look or think just like we do.

I saw this at the ***National Prayer breakfast*** on Thursday.
I sat at a table of believers from very different Christian traditions.
We all had very different ways of praying,
And it was beautiful and amazing,
because we were all so different,
and yet we were praying to the very same God.

I heard a woman praying in tongues,
That special mysterious prayer language.
I may not pray the same way as those at my table that morning,
but I do know it's ***powerful*** to come together in prayer,
regardless of who we are, or what we look like,
or what denomination we belong to,
because we are all Christians, brothers and sisters in ***one body of Christ***.

And Jesus was very clear in his prayer for all believers before his death,
in John 17 he prays again and again that all his followers would be ***ONE***.
One body.

That was the theme of the National Day of Prayer this year—***unity***.
And it was amazing to see it happening right in front of us at that breakfast.

You know, there's a ***real danger*** in thinking that ***we can control*** our lives,
or that what is ***familiar and comfortable is always right***.
The only person who's always right is God,

and the only person in real control of anything, is God.
Not us.

This might be why some of the most **control freaky people** are the most stressed out. Because controlling our world is really an **illusion**.
We can try all we want to keep things the same,
but the **world is constantly changing** all around us,
and **God is constantly working** in that ever-changing world.

That's **good news** when you think about it.
If it makes us tired and irritated to see everything constantly change,
our solace comes in knowing that **God is in control**,
even over the changes!
God is walking with us through the changes.

God is our **only hope** of navigating in a changing world,
because God is the only thing that does **NOT change**.
Everything changes, but not our God.
Jesus does not change.
Our salvation, the love and grace and mercy of God, does not change.
And Jesus has promised that he is always with us, to the end of the age.
And how do we experience that today?
Through the power of the **Holy Spirit**.

I think we learn to ride the waves of change,
We learn to break down barriers and boundaries,
By **holding tight to the Holy Spirit** who helps us move forward.
When Jesus describes the Spirit in John 3:8, he says *The **wind** blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*

In other words, the Holy Spirit is a little **rogue**—
doing something **new** all the time.
Easter was totally new—the resurrection of Jesus was amazing and new!
Talk about **turning the world upside down!**
It was the beginning of a **whole new time** in history—
a time where followers of Jesus,
had a whole **new reason for living**—quite literally!
All Because Jesus was raised from death!

It's no wonder that God wanted that news,
that ***good news, to be spread*** to the whole world!

Consider this—if you had the ***secret to constant joy and peace---***
wouldn't you want everyone you know to know about that?
I would.

In a way, ***we do have*** that secret—in our Christian faith!
So don't we want as many people as possible to know that joy and peace?

But how does that happen?

It doesn't happen by us doing and saying and living
the same way, day after day.

The good news spreads when ***we move outside our familiar comfort zones,***
When we find and meet and befriend new people,
And we share the good news!

But just like the Holy Spirit can make us a little ***nervous,***
Sharing the good news can too!
Does it mean we need to go door to door sharing faith?

Not necessarily.

I think it means we ***live our lives, open to the Spirit's call*** in our hearts.
Like ***Cornelius***, we live ***lives of faith***—and pay attention when we hear or see
something from God!
Like ***Peter***, we pay attention when God challenges our ideas of who is good,
and who's not.
Who is in, and who's out.

Ever have a vision from God?

Are you ***sure?***

Sometimes I think God is ***subtle***, giving us signs, and hints,
that we might miss if we aren't paying attention!

I think that God also ***gives churches visions*** for opening the doors of God's
kingdom—where have we as a church seen this?

Peter says clearly, ***"God shows no partiality"***.

In other words, God loves ALL people, the question is, do we believe that?
How do we live that out?

Where is God asking you to live that out?
How is God asking our church to do that?

Paul writes something similar in Galatians 3:28:

28 There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are ONE in Christ Jesus.

That's really great news, my friends!
It may sound ***trite*** to say that God loves everyone,
But it really is a ***powerful statement***, a revolutionary one,
if we take it to heart.

How can we ***live that Good News?***
Where is God working in our ***hearts?*** In our ***church?***

I read the most beautiful story this week by David Brooks, about 2 ***Italian couples in Como, Italy***—neither had a desire for children, or for faith.
But after meeting an Italian priest, who described faith as an encounter with ***beauty, a love story***, they all became ***Christians***.
Then their lives started to change.

Brooks writes: "*some of the people who do the most good have a **willingness to be radically changed**. They are **sensitive** to the problems around them, which a lot of us are, but they are also **willing to transform their lives to address them, which a lot of us don't consider.**"*

These two couples each felt the ***Spirit nudging them***,
after hearing about an abandoned HIV infected baby.
They slowly started taking in ***disabled children***,
eventually building a compound called Cometa,
where they take in abandoned children and raise them—surrounded by ***beauty and love***. One of the wives said, "*At first, I was afraid of disabled children,*" "*But her presence has been a **revolution of love** for the entire family.*"

They also have a huge after school program now,
and recently added a vocational high school, a mental health center,
and a café. Want to know their motto? ***Beauty educates.***

The grounds are **beautiful**, with immaculate gardens and gorgeous living quarters. Every piece of furniture is elegant, every broken toy is immediately fixed. They say that children who grew up being cursed at, now are **surrounded by love and beauty**, so they know they are **important and cherished**.

“Like all of us, the people at Cometa are aware that the worldwide decline of family and community has left millions of children estranged from any experience of a loving home.

*Unlike most of us, they’ve **transformed their life plans** to fill the gap.”*

David Brooks. *The Loving Place for Children That Assumes Beauty*, The New York Times. April 30, 2018.

How is **God calling us to get outside** our comfort zones,
To break down boundaries and barriers,
To show God’s love?
Where are **you feeling the nudge of the Holy Spirit?**
And how will you pay attention to that call?

Friends, hear the **Good News of the Gospel:**
God shows no partiality.

The question is, do we?

May we be open to the power of the Spirit,
that we might see the **doors of God’s kingdom, opened wide!**

Amen.