

Pentecost B
Where the Spirit Leads

May 19, 2024
Acts 2:1-21

The Holy Spirit came upon the disciples in a powerful way on Pentecost. That's the nice part about Pentecost. What wasn't so nice is that the Spirit led the disciples to places where they didn't plan to go and people they never planned to see.

That happened to me, living a nice, comfortable, retired life in Yuma, Arizona, in a fairly recently remodeled house. In some mysterious ways, I ended up in Northwest Washington – and buying a house in Southwest Washington, in which we are doing some remodeling. The Spirit can lead us to place where we never planned to go; to people we had never planned to see. Such unexpected leadings can have marvelous results.

We know from the gospels that Peter did not want to tell others that he knew Jesus. He denied knowing Jesus three times to a young, servant girl. Yet, in the second half of this lesson, Peter, led by the Spirit, is talking about Jesus to a huge crowd. We are told that three thousand converts were baptized after his speech. Note: it wasn't the miraculous speaking in tongues that converted them, but Peter's speech in his own language.

The Spirit led Peter and John to Samaria. I don't think that they wanted to go there. There had been about a 700-year rift between Jews and Samaritans. It was even worse than the rift between Swedes and Norwegians. There are reports of Jews walking miles out of their way to avoid walking on Samaritan land. There are commands in the Torah that the original Israelites who lived there broke: intermarriage with non-Jews that the Assyrians forced to live there; and the worship of idols that the non-Jews brought with them when the Assyrians forced them to live there. Jews considered the Samaritans as law-breaking, half-breed, pagans.

The apostles were so surprised to hear that Samaritans had come to believe in Jesus, they send Peter and John, perhaps the top-ranking apostles to Samaria. Could those people really come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah? They see the Holy Spirit at work among Samaritans. Peter and John had to accept these formerly hated people as fellow believers. I don't know if they really wanted to, but the Spirit showed them that they needed to.

Philip is led by the Spirit to an Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8. You heard that story three weeks ago. Besides not being Jewish and probably with darker skin than the Jews, there is a command in Deuteronomy that prohibits eunuchs from entering the assembly of the Lord.¹ When the eunuch asks, "What's to prevent me from being baptized?"² Philip could have said, "God's law does." He doesn't say that.

There was something about this man's acceptance of Philip's words about Jesus that convinced Philip that there was nothing, not even that law in Deuteronomy, that should prevent this believer from being baptized.

In Acts 10, the Spirit gives Peter the same vision three times. (Peter was a slow learner.) It was a vision of unclean foods – food that God's law forbid Jews to eat. Peter won't obey the command to eat. He eats only eats kosher foods. That's what God's law commands. The voice tells him, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."³ I'll

¹ Deuteronomy 23:1

² Acts 8:37

³ Acts 10:15

admit, there are some foods that I do not want to eat – especially those that still have eyes and look at me - even if God said I should.

These visions were not really about food, but about people. Peter ends up at the house of a Gentile named Cornelius. Peter tells the group there, “You yourselves know that it is *unlawful* for a Jew to associate with or to visit a gentile.”⁴ That was the law. That was the tradition.

In fact, the Greek word translated “unlawful,” can also mean, “disgusting.” Those are the people to whom the Spirit led Peter – and it took three visions, and a personal invitation for Peter to finally end up there. I don’t think that he wanted to go there.

Peter apparently was preaching a sermon that was too long. The text says, “While Peter was still speaking the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.”⁵ These Gentiles began to speak in tongues just like the Jewish disciples had done on Pentecost. Peter had talked long enough.

While this story is usually called, “The Conversion of the Gentiles,” it was also the Jewish believers who needed converting. It says that they were surprised that God would give the Holy Spirit to Gentiles just like God had done to the Jewish believers. The Jews had been taught that God didn’t like Gentiles – that they were disgusting people – that Jews should not associate with them. God, through the Spirit, taught them something different.

When Peter returned to Jerusalem the Jewish Christians criticized him for eating with Gentiles. (Maybe the vision was a little bit about food.) I’m not sure that Peter enjoyed coming back to such critical, judgmental people. I know that I don’t like facing such people.

I think the Spirit led him there, too. He shares the story of his visions, and God giving the Spirit to the Gentiles. (He didn’t say anything about his long sermon being interrupted.) What could those critics say. God treated the Gentiles in exactly the same way that God had treated the Jewish believers in Christ – with an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. How can you argue with God?

As I thought about this theme, it struck me that the Spirit doesn’t have to anything to have us go and visit our friends. We do that naturally and willingly.

It may require the Spirit’s prodding for us to go and listen to folks who are quite different from us as those first Jewish Christians were led to do with Samaritans, a eunuch, and disgusting Gentiles. Going to each of those people was breaking some commands and traditions and customs of the day; but such boundary crossings was necessary if Peter’s last statement in our text is to happen: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”⁶

Everyone means everyone: Jews, Gentiles, Samaritans, Eunuchs, and even people we might consider disgusting. Sometimes the most disgusting people we know are ourselves. We know our sins. We know that we have disobeyed God. The Spirit still brings God’s saving Word to us – both in our hearing; and also in our eating and drinking Christ in the sacrament of salvation. Calling on the name of the Lord brings salvation for everyone – including us sinners.

⁴ Acts 10:28

⁵ Acts 10:44

⁶ Acts 2:21

A meme on Facebook captures this well: Jesus wasn't hated for who he kept out of the Kingdom of God, but because of who he welcomed in.