

## **“Something More Important Than the Sermon”**

**Acts 10:44–48**

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**May 5, 2024**

Most churches have very precise expectations about time for sermons and worship, but some churches are more precise than others. In one church I served, I was told that before my time, an older leader there always sat on the front pew. When the sermon began, he pulled out his pocket watch and opened it. When he decided the sermon had gone on long enough, he closed the watch and put it back in his pocket. Any preacher with any sense wrapped things up quickly.

In another setting, there was a tradition of someone in the back waving a white handkerchief in surrender if the sermon was deemed to be going on too long. Thankfully, I was never shown the white flag, but I certainly paid attention to time there. In some settings, if Jesus himself is the guest preacher, he better not speak too long. And I should add that, in both these settings, worship started at 10:30 AM so that they could finish early and beat the Methodists and Presbyterians to lunch!

This obsession with time can be irritating and contrary to the spirit of worship, but the truth is some services seem interminable due to inadequate planning, and some sermons are just too long. I will never forget something Dana’s mother said while her beloved former pastor, long retired, was preaching at the church I served in Louisville. He was a rambler and had gone on for some time when Joann cut her eyes at me and said, “That horse has circled the barn several times. He needs to go in!” Some sermons are too long, and though I hesitate to say this out loud, there are things that are more important than the sermon.

Consider today’s reading from Acts. Before we have joined the story, Peter has been opposed to sharing the Good News of Jesus with Gentiles until God speaks to him through a vision of food that he thinks is unclean. He is told that what God has made clean, he must not call profane. This is not a story about eating habits in the first century. The

message is about taking the Gospel to the Gentiles, people thought to be unclean. And at the same time Peter has his vision, a God-fearing centurion named Cornelius in Caesaria has a vision in which he is told that his prayers have been answered. He has been seeking faith and the way to find it is to send for Peter. So, he does.

The combination of visions is more than Peter can ignore. He has been stuck in his ways — strong in his convictions, we might say — about who is included and who is not, about the boundaries that ought to be kept between Jews and Gentiles. But the scales fall from his eyes now, he sees what God intends. So, he goes to Caesaria, meets Cornelius and other Gentiles with him, and tells them that God shows no partiality but rather embraces all people in love. Then, he tells them about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and what all of this means.

This is where we join the story today. Peter has had a change of heart, and he is preaching passionately, more passionately than ever before, but the text says that *while he is still speaking*, the Holy Spirit falls upon all who hear the word, and Peter stops. No one closes a pocket watch, no one waves a white flag, but the Spirit falls on all who hear, and all heaven breaks loose! That is what happens when the Spirit gets involved. We set aside what we had planned, and wonderful things happen, but we better buckle up because not everyone will like it!

In this case, some circumcised believers who are there, those of Jewish background, are astounded that the Spirit has fallen *even on the Gentiles*. The language indicates that these people are not just amazed at what is happening, they are put off by it. It's like saying, "Did you see the length of his hair... the length of her skirt?" Gentiles are included?!

But Peter confronts the indignation with these words, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" In other words, are we more discerning than the Spirit? What God has made holy, do not call profane! He orders the people to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Peter doesn't get to finish his sermon, but he doesn't care. There is something more important happening. The point is not for him to preach but for God's work to get done, and the Spirit is taking care of that. The work is what it has always been — to include more and more people in

God's love, to make one family of all people. If Peter's preaching can help, great, but the important thing is that it happens.

This is what matters to this day, this is what is more important than any sermon, that everyone be included in God's love, but it is a message we struggle to embrace. We may talk about the expansive nature of God's love and our connection to all people, even preach about such things, but the calling is not simply to say the right things but for people to experience love. Cornelius and the other Gentiles in Caesaria are not just told they are loved. They are filled with the Spirit, affirmed by Peter, and baptized into the faith. That is what we are called to facilitate.

We acknowledge this, but our actions betray a hierarchical way of valuing people in which some are deemed less worthy of God's love and excluded from our circle of friendship. We believe that God embraces all in love, but we still divide the world into categories of us and them, establish and maintain boundaries, insist on building fences and walls, ostensibly to keep danger out and preserve our sacred identity.

And there may be some wisdom in this, dangers do exist, and sometimes fences make for good relationships with neighbors; but as long as we categorize and divide people, as long as we allow fear to define us, as long as we dismiss the value of entire groups of people whether Israeli or Palestinian, Jewish or Muslim, democrat or republican, we fall short of God's vision for humankind.

Part of the challenge is that we have conflicts, wars even, and it is difficult to embrace anyone with whom we have fought a war. Part of the challenge is that fear leads to misunderstanding. But the truth is everyday life, especially in our culture, can distance us from each other.

In his book *Simplicity* Franciscan Richard Rohr tells a story about a time he was preaching in the cathedral in Nairobi, Kenya. Afterward, those gathered shared a time of prayer, and one man prayed, "Lord, never let us move into stone houses (p. 88)." Rohr says he nodded, and said, "Yes, Lord," even though he had no idea what the man meant. But after the prayer time, he asked the man about his petition.

The man told him that in Africa, people live in small huts without doors. So, my house is your house, my family is your family. But when

people move into stone houses, they put doors on them, and then they put locks on the doors, they collect belongings and spend the rest of their lives protecting them. The world is divided between mine and thine.

We are not going to move into huts. The very idea of life without central air conditioning terrifies us! But in our technological advances, we have lost something in the way of community. Might we live with hearts open to others, a willingness to learn from people who are different, a desire to see the part of God that exists even in the person we think of as an enemy? Scripture says we are all created in the image of God which means that each of us reflects God's character in some way.

But while there are things we can and should do to help others embrace their identity as beloved children of God, and to embrace them with our love, we are not alone in this work. In the reading from Acts, the Spirit is poured out on those who hear, and this is when all heaven breaks loose! Sometimes we have to leave room for the Spirit to move or just recognize where the Spirit is going.

Homiletics professor Barbara Lundblad tells a story about a pastoral colleague who co-led an ecumenical service with a Roman Catholic priest (*Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2, pp. 481-482). They agreed that the priest would distribute bread on the left side of the sanctuary and the Reformed minister would distribute on the right, so that the congregants could receive within their appropriate traditions.

But when it came time for communion, the people were so elated to be worshiping together that they forgot or disregarded the instructions and went to the clergy person closest to them. The minister and priest saw the disruption of tradition, but decided not to intervene, even at the risk of authorities finding out. They just made sure everyone was fed.

Lundblad observes, "It was as though they heard Peter saying, 'Can anyone withhold the bread from these people who also share faith in Jesus Christ?'" The Spirit of God was at work, and they were wise enough to stay out of the way.

Experiences like this, whether in worship or service, fellowship or daily life, are more important than any sermon. For once we experience God's love with other people, we cannot help but see them for who they really are, fellow children of God, our sisters and brothers, one and all!