

“The Living Tie That Binds”

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, May 6, 2018

Acts 10:44-48

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. 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, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, ‘Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’ So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

John 15:9-17

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, we come to worship you, to be moved by music and song and to hear your Word. So be with us now as we consider it together. Open our hearts and our minds. In Chris’t name, we pray. Amen.

At first, it seems odd to me that this passage would be selected for this Sunday because it's about the Holy Spirit and Pentecost Sunday isn't until the 20th of May. Pentecost is often called the birthday of the church and so often we tend to read it as everyone from every nation was able to understand one another even though they spoke a different language because the Holy Spirit was moving among them. And indeed those there did understand one another. But on closer examination, you find that the Pentecost passage is all about Jewish people from different nations coming together. A kind of resolution of the chaos caused when the people built the tower of Babel. This morning's reading tells us about the Holy Spirit moving in a new direction. A very unexpected direction. The Holy Spirit now, is speaking through and to people who are different. Those called the Other. Those considered outsiders. So it appears that in this reading that the Holy Spirit is not just uniting Jews and Jewish Christians, it may be moving among the Gentiles too.

It puts Peter and those with him in a quandry because these people aren't clean and they don't practice their laws. So I think it's helpful to consider, "Well, what led to this moment?" The book of Acts is a book written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke. It was written a number of years after Jesus' death and resurrection. And it's a very difficult time in Jerusalem. There was a rebellion against the Romans and the Romans destroyed the temple. It's a time filled with tension and sadness and persecution. The opening passages of Acts tell us how the Gospel begins to be spread. First, the disciples share in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. It's not an easy time. The disciples and converts are facing many challenges. Some are not allowed to enter into synagogues and the others are persecuted. They moved on to Samaria. Now, that might be a surprise at first because the Samaritans were not well regarded, but consider Jesus and the story of the good Samaritan, and the story of the woman at the well. So the Gospel spreads. Then we come into the story this morning. It's moving to other nations. We learn of Steven's martyrdom, and Peter's imprisonment, and the persecution of many. And then we read about Saul's conversion. Saul, though, had asked for letters from the high priest

so he could go to Damascus and bring back converts to Jerusalem so that they could be punished. But something else happened on that road to Damascus. He had that vision and he's converted and becomes Paul. At first, given all that he had done to the disciples, they refused to believe him. But in time he won them over. So now, the disciples moved on from Judea to Samaria and other lands seeking to share the good news with their Jewish brothers and sisters. But then enter in Cornelius, a man who is not a Jew but practices Jewish laws, gives alms to the poor, and prays to God. But he is not circumcised, so he's not considered a proper Jew. Cornelius has a vision, though, about Peter and he sends some of his men out to find him. In the meantime, Peter has a vision of his own. If you want to read about visions, Acts is the place to go, there's a lot going on! So Peter has this very odd vision about God telling him that it's all right to eat animals that are unclean--something that he as a Jew would normally never do. So you can imagine, he was very puzzled about this vision. But when the men sent by Cornelius arrive, he begins to get a glimmer of what was in that message. He invites these men into his home, something that he would not have done before because they are not Jewish. When they ask him to go to Cornelius' house to share the faith, Peter is willing to do it, and he eats with them. This is something he normally would not do, but because he remembers in the message that God had said, "God shows no partiality but in every nation, anyone who hears him and does what is right is acceptable to God." So Peter is wondering, "Does God want me to understand that everyone, even the Gentiles, are welcomed by God?"

Now, it's easy to see why Peter is surprised at first. Why would Gentiles ask about a Jewish Messiah? But Peter senses something else, this man has an open mind and an open heart. So he invites Cornelius and all those in his household to be baptized. Now some of his fellow travelers are not happy with this. In fact, they're shocked. And when he goes to Jerusalem, he is roundly criticized but he stands firm, he tells them about the vision. He tells them that he thinks the Spirit is moving. He tells them about the openness of the Gentiles, and then he says to them, "If God gave them the same gift of the Holy Spirit that he gave us, who am I that I could hinder God?"

Given all the tensions and concerns going on among the Jewish people after the rebellion, it could have been quite a different response. But the Spirit is moving and they begin to realize that Peter is right. God is calling them to welcome the other and in so doing, they widen the circle. So then we have to ask ourselves, what enables this to happen? What enables them to come together? These two groups of people don't share the same dietary laws, they don't share the same rituals, and they do not share in the act of circumcision. So what transforms them? What unites them? I think the answer is in John's Gospel. It is love. Love is that which enables them to have open hearts and open minds and become open to the Other. This love is not the kind of love about passion or good buddy friendship or parental love. It is the kind of love that opens one's way of looking at the world and of being in relationship with other people and other people, even those we don't know well. I was in Louisville last week for a conference called The Festival of Faiths. And I cannot help but think the reason that it takes place there is because that's where Thomas Merton had his vision. Right across from my hotel is this big, metal sign that shares that Thomas Merton had stood at that corner of Fourth and what is now called Muhammad Ali Boulevard and had a vision that he was connected to everyone on the street around him. It was a vision that changed his life. This morning's reading from John echoes that. Jesus has told them in the previous chapter and this one, "I'm not leaving you alone. I may no longer be among you but the Holy Spirit will be here." The Holy Spirit will come and offer you wisdom, and peace, and comfort. So this community of people came to realize that the love that Jesus talked about was to be extended to everyone, to welcome the other, to invite those not well not known, and to widen the circle with a tie that now binds them together, love. Now, they don't become just like one another, but there's no barrier anymore. By the power of love, they come to realize that while they are different they share much more in common. They are now able to be "one in the Spirit and one in the Lord."

I think the connection between the two passages this morning is that the Spirit moves as it will, and the tie that can bind us together opens our hearts to others in new ways, that if we're willing to open our hearts and our minds and listen to the spirit, the spirit has much to teach us about faith, about service, about love. They remind us that when the love of God dwells within us, it changes our view of the world and of others. It transforms our lives. And so, on Friday night, when I was watching the news with Jeff Glor, I saw a picture of a little superhero, and it reminded me of what John is saying, and what the writer of Acts is saying about the power of love to transform. I was struck by the fact that this four-year-old boy from Birmingham, Alabama has such wisdom. His name is Austin Perine, and once a week he turns into his alter ego, a superhero with a red cape who feeds as many people as he possibly can. He likes to go by the name of President Austin because he thinks that feeding people is what a president is supposed to do. His father said it all began one night when they were watching a TV show about pandas, and a mama panda abandoned its baby and his dad said to Austin the cub was now homeless and Austin said, "Dad, what's homeless?" And he said, "It's when you don't

have a home and sometimes you don't have a mum or dad around." And then Austin looked at his dad and said, "Are people homeless?"

And T.J. said, "Yes, they are." And when Austin learned that people are homeless and hungry, he launched into his caped crusade. He told his mom and dad he didn't want an allowance anymore, and the money they might spend on toys should go towards buying meals. So once a week, he and his dad go to a fast food place and buy sandwiches and soda and then he goes down into the parks and to the streets and goes up to somebody sitting alone and he says, "Hey, are you hungry?" And if they say, "yes", he gives them a sandwich and a drink and then he gives them a bit of advice, "Don't forget to show the love," and most do immediately. Everyone he meets is treated with kindness, a smile, and a hug if offered. These are the ones who are struggling--the other, the homeless, the hopeless. One of those he shared with said, "This kid gives me hope." Everyone who meets him leaves with hope." So the Spirit is moving and it's clearly speaking to Austin, and he's listening. He's a superhero of another kind. A wise child who shows us that the others are children of God as well. He practices what we're called to do. For him, there is no Other. So as we go about our lives in this world may we abide in love, and may we remember Austin's wonderful words, "Don't forget to share the love."

Amen

CBS evening news with Jeff Glor, Friday, May 4, 2018.