

That Pesky Holy Spirit is Stirring Things Up (*then and now*)

The Rev. Mark D. Wilkinson, Rector

St. Aidan's Episcopal Church

Virginia Beach VA 23452

www.aidanvba.net

Acts 10

That pesky Holy Spirit has been very busy the past few weeks in the Acts of the Apostles. In fact the Holy Spirit is the subject of much of the early chapters of Acts. Why? Because somebody had to get the word out that this Good News was not just for any one group, but for the entire world. However the early church was a little slow to pick up on this and I believe we are just as slow in some cases today.

So what has the Spirit been up to? Last week was the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch. What I didn't talk about last week was that this eunuch was a total outcast because of his sexuality. He was a faithful Jew, probably well off, and highly educated. He was after all the queen's treasurer. He had made a pilgrimage all the way from Ethiopia only to be turned away from the temple. A Eunuch could only enter the courtyard of the women. You see he was damaged goods considered an "abomination" according to Leviticus and unworthy to worship with the men. (By the way abomination in the ancient Hebrew meant against custom.) Yet after listening to Phillip he remarks, "Here is water, what is to prevent my being baptized?" Phillip responds by baptizing him on the spot without a second thought and the eunuch goes on his way rejoicing.

The very next passage, which we skip over in year B is the story of Saul, the worst persecutor of the Jews, breathing threats is on his way to Damascus to arrest disciples and early followers. He is stopped in his tracks, blinded, gets his sight restored and becomes, well simply the greatest apostle we have.

And now it's Peter's turn and he's being called to the Gentiles! Now you need a little of the back story on today's passage because they have left out most of the story.

Peter is on a balcony getting ready to pray when he falls into a trance and has a vision of a sheet coming down from heaven three times and he is told to kill and eat of the animals on the sheet. Many of which were not kosher. He refuses and the Spirit tells him nothing God has made clean is profane. In one vision the dietary laws are swept away. Shortly after Cornelius a Roman Centurion arrives and asks for Peter to come and instruct his household in this Jesus. They travel to his home in Caesarea and then we have today's passage.

This scene is set in the Centurion's house. Now that means that Peter has entered into a house of a person considered unclean by Peter's fellow Jews and all of them who enter are now considered unclean. Yet, Peter does not hesitate!

Possibly more remarkable the Centurion does not hesitate. It is critical to realize that being baptized probably ended his military career.

Peter begins teaching them and then all of a sudden the Holy Spirit arrives in the middle of this teaching. The Holy Spirit interrupts Peter's teaching and the gathered gentiles begin speaking in tongues! All are astonished at this action and to an outcast group. Scandalous! The Spirit has come upon them just as it came upon Peter and his disciples. This is a moment when the Spirit intervenes and changes everything. Outsiders are treated by the Spirit exactly the same as the apostles even though they are uncircumcised and don't keep a kosher diet. That they are outsiders no longer matters. The tent is opened up wide to all and this is incredibly revolutionary for a predominately Jewish sect who pride themselves on being special, chosen, the elite.

Peter asked, "Are there any objections, any reason I should not baptize these people?" Nobody objects because of what they experienced in Cornelius' house. However Peter's baptism of this group of Gentiles sets the stage for the very first major church fight and it's about who is in and who is out. So Peter retells the entire story to the gathered church in Jerusalem and persuades them that what he did was right.

All of these passages in these chapters are about openly accepting the other, the different, the outcast. This is a breaking open of the Good News to the entire population not just one small segment. Many of us have trouble today realizing just how difficult this is or maybe not. Maybe we as a church have not learned this lesson.

I find it ironic and frankly painful that as I prepared this sermon there is a story that has exploded off of Facebook, been covered by the Huffington Post, the Orlando Sentinel and picked up on many wire services. The issue breaks my heart

A couple, who have attended the Episcopal Cathedral Church in Orlando, had been looking forward to the baptism of their newly adopted son. They attended all of the classes, did all of the preparation and were well known to the congregation. Suddenly the dean of the cathedral informed the couple that he would not be baptizing their son because there were members of the congregation who objected. Why, because the couple is two men. This little baby has two fathers.

As you can imagine this went viral and now the bishop is meeting with the couple to question them about their willingness to raise the child in the church. That in and of itself bothers me. I don't imagine the bishop interviews every person seeking baptism. I find myself shaking my head in wonder as I have just read and preached on two stories from the early church where a man, considered an abomination by Levitical law, is joyfully baptized by Phillip. A Gentile and his

family, considered an outsider, risks his career in the military to be baptized by Peter after the Holy Spirit made it clear nobody is outside the reach of God's love. The cognitive dissonance makes my head hurt.

This week I went up to Washington to get some paperwork done at the Belgian Embassy for James as he plans a move with his girlfriend to Brussels. We had the opportunity to go to the Noonday Community Eucharist at Virginia Seminary. In the sermon the new church history professor said, "The message is to love each other it's that easy and that hard." I know the today's issue is difficult but we are talking about baptizing a baby, a child of God and raising him in the church. Hopefully in a church where he will never know the treatment his parents experienced. So yes it is easy but I also understand it is hard. It is hard when faced with difficult issues that challenge tradition especially when those traditions are important to so many. I imagine accepting un-circumcised non-Jews into the circle was hard, painful for many in the early church, but the Spirit kept working, prodding moving them to accept all who desired baptism.

Yes the Spirit has been busy in these passages and I believe the Holy Spirit is very busy today. The problem is the Spirit is rarely convenient and certainly challenges us daily to live and proclaim the life of love that Jesus did. So yes Christ's message of the last several weeks to love one another as I have loved you is both easy and very hard.

Once again however I want to remind you of something I learned from a priest I worked for in seminary. When the LGBT issue erupted in 2003 with Bishop Robinson, he said, "Mark when I have to answer for my life and work I would rather explain that I was too free with God's love than to have to explain why I was too stingy." Well, that's what I believe too. I may be wrong, but I'm willing to take that risk when I stand before God to explain my life and ministry. God loves everyone, no exceptions. It is that easy and yes it is that hard. AMEN.