

“The Spirit’s Power”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
May 6, 2018

Acts 10: 44-48

Of all the books in the Bible, I believe my favorite is the Book of Acts. Part of that could be that one of my favorite professors in seminary, Dr. Beverly Gaventa, taught a class on the Book of Acts, and it brought the biblical witness alive in a way I had not known before. Part of that could also be because it tells the story of the church’s earliest history, and I’ve always had a passion for history. It’s the second volume of a two-part narrative – the same writer who wrote the Gospel of Luke wrote the Book of Acts. The book begins: “In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning . . .” (1:1). The gospels tell the story of Jesus’ earthly life, death, and resurrection. The Book of Acts tells the story of how the first disciples – the church – told others about Jesus the Christ.

For four consecutive Sundays, we will be hearing stories from the Book of Acts. Last Sunday, Tom preached on the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, and the Spirit’s impetus for Philip - and us - to get up and go in God’s name. Next Sunday, we will hear the story of the apostles choosing a replacement for Judas, what I like to call the church’s first nominating committee and election! And of course, two weeks from today, we will celebrate the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit arrives in Jerusalem and empowers the church to be witnesses of the risen Lord Jesus.

The common theme which runs throughout those passages, as well as our story today, is the Holy Spirit. Yes, this book is entitled “The Acts of the Apostles.” But this biblical book could also be known as “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.” It is in Acts that we witness the Holy Spirit’s arrival on Pentecost, its movement in the lives of the disciples, and its power to lead the people of God to do things they otherwise would not have done on their own. It is in this book that we see, hear, feel, and experience God’s fulfillment of his promise to never leave us, even after Jesus is gone. It is in these words and sentences and stories that we hear the Advocate in our midst, and recognize that we don’t serve as Christ’s disciples by our own power and ability, but by the Spirit’s power.

Our story today is one that takes place after the Day of Pentecost and after Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. But it very well may be the most important story in Acts as it relates to the church’s mission and outreach, as dictated by the Spirit’s power. Indeed, if it had not been for this encounter between Peter and Cornelius, we may not be gathered here today.

The passage we have read this morning is the conclusion of a long narrative that begins at the start of chapter 10. To give us some context and background, hear how Pendleton Peery, a Presbyterian pastor in Charlotte, North Carolina, describes things. He writes:

Cornelius - a spiritual, but not religious Gentile living in Caesarea of some importance in the Roman legion and a member of the Italian Cohort - Cornelius had a vision. It was a clear vision . . . to send for an apostle of Jesus named Peter.

Peter - a devout and faithful Jew and an ardent follower of Jesus the Christ - Peter had a vision, too. His was not so clear. In fact, it was downright bizarre. Peter was in Joppa, praying on the roof of his friend's house, and he was hungry. While the food was being prepared, he fell into a trance and saw a sheet being lowered down from the heavens, filled with all of the foods that good Jews were not allowed to touch, much less eat. There was a voice, "Get up Peter, kill and eat." There was Peter's response, "By no means Lord! You know I can't eat what is profane and unclean!" There was a counter-response, "What God has made, you must not call profane."

It happened twice more; and then, before Peter could make heads or tails out of the vision, the sheet was snatched up into heaven and Cornelius' men were knocking at the door to take Peter on a trek from Joppa to Caesarea.

The Holy Spirit said "Go!" so Peter went. Arriving at the Gentile house, he realized that Cornelius was having a genuine experience of God, so he started in, preaching, to explain some things about this God who was giving Cornelius visions. Before Peter could finish his sermon, the Holy Spirit short-circuited the usual order of things and poured through the room, and all of a sudden the footprint of the church got a lot bigger . . . (<http://davi.org/3820-the-holy-spirit-as-a-preexisting-condition>).

Why did the church's footprint get a whole lot bigger? Here's why. Up until now, the apostles' focus had been on Jewish converts to Christianity. On the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit came to all who were in Jerusalem, which was the center of the Jewish church. These early disciples were first Jews, and then followers of Christ. Because of that heritage and identity, they initially only saw God's message of hope and love in Jesus being spoken to God's chosen people, the Jews. Think about it - Jesus himself was a Jew. The idea of the gospel message being worthy to share with non-Jews - the Gentiles - was practically beyond the apostle's comprehension. In fact, that is why Peter is initially robust in his opposition to eating anything that is unclean. His Jewish heritage prohibited him from considering such unclean animals.

But beginning with Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch, and then with Peter's encounter with Cornelius, we see the Spirit's power broadening the early church's vision of who was to be welcomed into the embrace of Christ's love. As we read today, "while Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers (Jewish believers) who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles" (10:44-45). Indeed, Peter himself is astounded by the Spirit's power, and proclaims, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (10:47). And they were baptized in the name the triune God, just as Christ had commissioned the apostles before he ascended into heaven (Matthew 28:16-20).

Jeffrey Peterson-Davis notes: *While Peter and Cornelius have central roles in this narrative, it is not a story about them. Rather, it is a story about the Holy*

Spirit and how the Spirit's purposes are accomplished in spite of the boundaries constructed by humans . . . The Holy Spirit was working a powerful transformation among the early Christians. Their perspective of who was "in" and who was "out" was being changed not by their own doing, but by the intervention of the Holy Spirit. The boundaries of the "inner circle" kept widening to the point that the assumed boundaries were no longer legitimate. Peter's own utterance that God shows no partiality is a radical departure from his own definitions of what or who is clean and unclean.

In this brief text we find exemplified the extravagance of the Holy Spirit and the wideness of God's grace. This story demonstrates that the Spirit is not bound by the limitations that even faithful believers have. The Spirit is not only poured out on the Gentiles; it is given to the Jewish Christians, enabling them to see with new eyes and capture a new vision of the kingdom of God ([Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2](#), Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2008: 480-482).

How does the Spirit's power continue to broaden and deepen our understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? As I said earlier, one way is the fact that we would not be here today if it had not been for the Spirit calling Peter and the Jerusalem church to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. If they had not been open to the Spirit's leading, Christianity might have simply remained a sect of Judaism. Instead, the circle of inclusion was expanded, and we were welcomed in. The Spirit's power at work.

The Spirit is at work in the comings and goings of people within the church. The Spirit is present when people feel led to find a new church home, as I wrote letters last week to families wishing them God's speed as they enter a new season in their life of faith. At the same time, it was with great joy that six people indicated an interest in becoming active members of John Knox over the last two weeks. And those six people represent five different nationalities and ethnicities. The Spirit's power at work.

The Spirit is present in our celebrations and in our struggles. The Spirit is at work when we disagree on things, reminding us that despite our dissension we are all beloved children in the eyes of our Creator. The Spirit is at work when we witness someone new taking a leap of faith, leading others, and being affirmed by the community of believers. The Spirit is at work when we walk with each other through transitions in life, loving one another as Christ has loved each of us. The Spirit is at work when we are given the power to speak words of grace to those we love most deeply as their earthly journey comes to an end. The Spirit's power at work.

How is the Spirit's power moving in your life? How can you be more open to the path the Spirit is leading you on? May we all receive the Spirit's power, leading us to a broader and deeper understanding of the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.