

Sermon at St John's Lutheran Church, Knoxville, TN, May 6, 2018
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Sometimes you move someplace
and you don't think you're going to stay.

Then it becomes home.

When Misty and I bought our first house in Knoxville,
we didn't even think about school zone,
because we didn't think we'd be here long enough
for our one-year-old son
to go to school.

Then, through friends
and investment in friends
and ministry,
all that changed.

And Knoxville kept getting cooler, and we realized, we love it here!

We thought about making bumper stickers,
"Knoxville: we didn't think we'd like it either!"

Let's pray.

May the words of my mouth
and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable to you, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

“Then they invited him to stay for several days.”

That’s a passage, a little

half-sentence at the end of Acts 10

that I’d missed before,

that’s caught my attention now,

maybe because I’m so happy we stayed.

Peter’s just finished preaching,

the Holy Spirit has descended on everyone,

they’ve been extolling God and speaking in tongues,

which at this point may still have been

speaking in a way that everyone could hear,

each in their own language,

a miracle of understanding,

or it may have been ecstatic speech as it later became,

but Peter, hearing these signs

that the Holy Spirit was given to them — Gentiles, outsiders to him,

up till now — just the same as it was given to the apostles,

has had the insight, “If God has given the Spirit to them,

who are we to withhold the water of baptism?”

If God has given God’s blessing, who are we to withhold ours?

So they’re baptized, and then, “they invited him to stay for several days.”

And we don't know if he took them up on it,
but we can presume he did,
because he kind of gets in trouble for it
right after.

“Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea” —
and Judea is where the word Jewish comes from,
Ju-dea, those from Judea, *Judaios*, Peter's in group, up till now —
“Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard
that the Gentiles” — the out group, up till now —
“that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God.”

So when Peter went up to Jerusalem,
the circumcised believers criticized him,
saying, ‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’
Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step...”
and he tells them about a vision he had,
of basically a picnic blanket from the sky,
covered in horrible things,
shrimp cocktail, bacon, lobster —
everything Peter, as a Jew, was not supposed to eat, up till now —
then he heard a voice from heaven saying, “Take and eat,”
so he does.

He wakes from the dream and messengers
from a centurion, a Gentile, named Cornelius,
come asking him to go to this Gentile's house,
and they were sent, because Cornelius had a vision
of a man named Simon, called Peter, staying in Joppa
in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea —
it's really extreme, the lengths God went to,
to get people over the hump
of rejecting each other,
to accepting each other — you know, God's big project since sin,
since Adam, instead of saying, "Yep, I bit the apple," blamed Eve
and blamed God for giving them each other.

So Peter explains all this,
explains his decision
and how he came to it, step by step,
how he spoke the word of God to Cornelius's family and friends
and the Holy Spirit fell on them, how he remembered the word of the Lord,
how Jesus had said, "John baptized with water,
but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit," and he says, "If then God
gave them the same gift that he gave us... who was I that I could hinder
God?" And it says, "When they heard this, they were silenced.

And they praised God, saying,

‘Then God has given even to the Gentiles
the repentance that leads to life’,” basically,
the reunification of all creation, in Christ.

This passage was really significant for me,
in 2009, when the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,
our branch of the church family,
was deciding about sexuality and marriage and ministry,
whether same sex relationships could be blessed by God
and by the church, which was a big question
and a big deal for a lot of lives.

And it had seemed to me that the church had been wrong
for a long time
about not blessing,
but I’d come to that belief when I was away from the church
and I’d been coming back to church
and it was confusing.

Maybe I was wrong
about the church being wrong,
and how could I tell?

Was there a way?

So I asked, was there a time, when the church faced a similar situation, and how did they tell? I wanted to do what was right,

I didn't want to lead people into error, either way.

Here in Acts, they're sorting out exactly the same sort of thing, who can be considered clean, blessed, right as they are, with God?

And the sign was the gifting of the Holy Spirit.

Well, what does that look like?

Well, one is, is there a miracle of understanding?

Are people speaking in a way that they hear God's love in a way they hadn't before? Well yes, it seemed people were.

But people were also freaking out, getting really angry, so how do you tell what's going on?

How do you discern the spirits involved, which is Holy, which is something else?

Well, Paul is kind of a punching bag for a lot of people, because he sometimes shot his mouth off, trying to help, when maybe it would have been better to let it go.

Women's hairstyles, for instance. There's a whole thing, where he says women have to have long hair, "because of the angels," as if everyone knew what that meant, "because of the angels.:

It's interesting stuff, pretty weird actually, but that's a whole nother sermon.

I've made the same mistake, not about hair, but offering an opinion when what was needed was love.

Anyway, Paul may have gotten some things wrong, but he sure got some right. Like a beautiful list of fruit of the spirit, in Galatians 5, and Jesus says, in our Gospel, he wants us to bear fruit, fruit of the spirit, the fruit borne by a life flowing from God.

“Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

And a list of works of the flesh, the kinds of things not borne of God, but wrought by the anxieties and angers and fears of the world afraid for itself, apart from God, or afraid it will be apart from God, if it doesn't get everything right. “Fornication, impurity, licentiousness,” it's quite a list, “idolatry, sorcery,” and — hear this next part — “enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy,” and, finally, “drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.”

And as I'm seeing this miracle of new understanding, that God blesses people the church thought God didn't bless and calls us to do the same, and people freaking out, what I'm seeing is LGBTQIA leaders being so loving, patient, and kind, the other side, where I was at the time, flat covered up in “enmities, strife... anger... factions...,” and it was clear.

You know, you get to choose your god.
A lot of times I think we choose Zeus,
Odin, Thor — anyone with lightning bolts, really —
especially when we're angry or afraid
and just want to make people do what we want or go away —
but when you come to believe Jesus, the living image of outpouring love,
placing oneself at the service of others in love,
not controlling, not being controlled,
but freely offering yourself in love —
when you see that as the image of God,
when you choose Jesus as the meeting point of heaven and earth,
the anointed one, the Christ,
you become a child of God,
and whoever loves the parent loves the child.
Which means, for real, if you love God who is love,
you have to love all these other folks who do too,
which includes people who are angry or afraid.
And as you realize you don't, you bring that to the cross,
to the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,
as the Spirit of God moves over the chaos of our lives, creates us again
in the image of God, in love.

It's a heck of a discipline, Christian friendship.

I want to close out with a beautiful passage from Henri Nouwen.

I'm going to be taking a sabbatical soon, some of you know.

Pastor Steve is plumb tired of hearing me talk about it, :)

but others probably don't know,

because we had a bigger announcement,

with Pastor Steve's upcoming retirement.

The point of sabbatical is rest and renewal

so you can come back and serve

with new energy.

Pastor Steve lent me this book

and was very clear I have to return it,

because Pastor Amy gave it to Pastor Steve

when he took his first sabbatical.

This passage is about the discipline

and the risk

of friendship.

Nouwen is a priest

who worked the last part of his life at Daybreak,

an intentional Christian community

of people with significant mental handicap.

He speaks of two friends,
co-pastors on that journey.

“I have felt rejected as well as supported,
abandoned as well as embraced, hated as well as loved.

All through it I have come to discover
that friendship is a real discipline.

Nothing can be taken for granted,
nothing happens automatically,
nothing comes without concentrated effort.

Friendship requires trust, patience, attentiveness, courage, repentance,
forgiveness, celebration, and most of all faithfulness.

It is amazing for me to realize
how often I thought that it was all over,
that both Nathan and Sue had betrayed me or dropped me,
and how easily feelings of jealousy, resentment,
anger, and depression came over me.

It is even more amazing to see that we are still friends,
yes, the best of friends.

But it certainly has been hard work for all three of us.”

I want you to know, I am honored
to call you friends and family in Christ.

I'll let Nouwen have the last word.

“After our dinner together, Sue, Nathan, and I saw the movie *Apollo 13*, about an aborted moon flight and a successful attempt to bring the three astronauts safely back to earth.

Underneath all the spectacular technology

there is the story of human relationships

and the discipline required to make them lifesaving.

As the three of us watched it, I realized that somehow we too are astronauts in a spaceship trying to make it home safely.

I guess that is true of all people who take the risk of friendship.”

In the name of Christ, who is with us always.

Amen.