

“The Spirit’s Embrace”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for May 6th 2018 (Sixth Sunday of Easter)
by Foster Freed

Acts 10: 44-48

Questions are important; even in the course of an every-day conversation, we tend to pay extra special attention to the questions that may be posed to us in the course of those conversations.

When we encounter a text from scripture, questions play a no less crucial role. Indeed: some of the most remarkable moments in our Biblical story, are moments punctuated by the asking of questions. Questions: such as the momentous first question asked in scripture, a question the serpent puts to Eve: “Did God actually say, “You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?” Questions: such as the no less momentous question Cain asks of God: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Questions: such as the two-headed question Jesus, in the New Testament, places before his disciples: “Who do people say that I am?”, quickly followed by “But who do you say that I am?” Do you see what I mean...do you see what I mean when I say that in scripture—as in life—it behooves us to pay close attention to the questions that are asked along the way. And yes: most definitely!

Most definitely: this morning’s text includes a humdinger of a question: a question which, I believe, helps to give shape to the entire reading, indeed, shape to the entire chapter of which this morning’s brief snippet provides the fitting climax. But let me not get ahead of myself; permit me to take a step back in order briefly to speak of the shape of this season we call Easter, the shape of this book we call *Acts of the Apostles* and finally, the shape of this 10th chapter of *Acts*, as crucial a chapter as can be found anywhere in the New Testament.

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Let’s start with Easter: the 50-day season of which we are now well past the half-way mark. It is fair to say that the focus of our Easter readings tends to fall in one of two directions. During the first few weeks of Easter our attention is directed toward the risen Christ: not surprising given the very nature of the Easter festival which proclaims the resurrection of Christ. However! Roughly half-way through Easter’s 50 days, there is a subtle shift, and our attention is directed to the coming Spirit: the Spirit unleashed upon the Church on the 50th day of Easter, which we call Pentecost. With Pentecost a mere two Sundays away, it is hardly surprising that the decisive turning point in this morning’s story occurs when Peter—and the other Jewish disciples—witness unmistakable signs that the Gentiles whom they have come to visit, have also been visited by the Holy Spirit. And so yes: in this Easter season, it is entirely appropriate—

having celebrated the risen Christ—for us to begin to anticipate the embrace of the Spirit which is, in a very real sense, the Spirit of the risen Christ: the Spirit who, in many ways, is both the author and the main character—the main actor—in the book we know as *Acts*. Speaking of which...

...speaking of which: the *Acts of the Apostles* is the New Testament's great history book. Playing the role in the New Testament that such books as Joshua, Judges, 1st and 2nd Samuel, 1st and 2nd Kings play in the Old Testament, *Acts* tells the story of what happens to Christ's disciples—and what happens to the message of Christ—after his death, his resurrection and his ascension. Given Christ's departure at his ascension, the disciples appear to have been left on their own: abandoned, so to speak. In the event, the first key moment in *Acts* occurs with the Spirit's arrival, coming to govern and to guide the church, and to direct the story that unfolds as the Gospel spreads from its origins in the outskirts of the city of Jerusalem, eventually reaching every corner of the earth. In order for that to happen, however, the early church needs clarity about one crucial issue, namely: is this new religious movement (what we call Christianity) nothing more than a movement within Judaism, or is it a movement that is destined to overflow the banks of Judaism? With the hindsight provided by the distance of 2000 years, we know the answer to that question! At the time, they didn't have the sort of 20/20 hindsight we can claim! They first disciples needed to work things out for themselves: thankfully with the leading—and in the embrace—of the Holy Spirit. And that's why *Acts* 10th chapter...why its 10th chapter...marks such a crucial turning point in the journey of the Gospel, in the journey of the Church.

You see: by the end of *Acts*, we know that the Apostle Paul became the indispensable person responsible for bringing the Gospel to the Gentile world. It is highly unlikely, however, that Paul would have been given that opportunity had not Peter—Simon Peter—given his blessing to Paul's venture as the Apostle to the Gentiles: the challenge being that when *Acts* 10 gets underway, one and only one Gentile has been fully received into the Christian movement. Who is that one Gentile? The Ethiopian eunuch that Phillip baptizes on the road that leads from Jerusalem to Ethiopia. That delightful story, however, is a bit of a one off: something that takes place in a remote backwater at the hands of a Christian deacon whose authority to initiate that sort of change is far from certain. Something more is needed: ideally something that no less a personage than Simon Peter needs to witness and affirm. And that, you see, is what happens in the 10th chapter of *Acts*. Permit me to remind you of the story.

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The chapter begins with a glimpse of a God-fearing gentile—a Roman Centurion—by the name of Cornelius. Cornelius is visited by an angel, who informs Cornelius that his prayers have been answered and that he is to send for a man named Simon Peter. A man of great faith, Cornelius follows the instructions provided by the angel, and sends his best men to fetch Peter. As they approach the city where Peter is

staying, Peter has a vivid dream in which a sheet descends from heaven populated by animals considered—by the standards of the Old Testament—to be unclean: unfit for consumption by those who are members of the people of God. While in a trance, Peter is commanded to eat...but refuses to do so, saying that he will not eat anything that is unclean. But the voice immediately fires back, asking Peter why he is calling unclean, that which God has rendered clean. And yes: no sooner does Peter awake from his dream-vision, than Cornelius' soldiers arrive, and he agrees to follow them.

When Peter, the next day, comes face to face with Cornelius' and Cornelius' circle of family and friends, it is not hard for Peter to see that his vision—his dream—referred to this group of Gentiles: those who Peter (up until that point) would have regarded as outsiders, but who he now recognizes as those who have been fully accepted as members of God's people. Lest there be any doubt on that score...

...this is where our reading, this morning, picked up the story...

...the Holy Spirit swoops in, offers its unmistakable embrace to Cornelius, his family and friends, leading Peter to ask that crucial question to which I referred earlier: a question that helps to focus everything that has been taking place from the moment that angel told Cornelius to send for Peter. "Can anyone," asks Peter: "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" Well! What do you think? Can anyone? Can anyone withhold water for baptizing those people? It's a crucial question...a question upon which the entire history of the Christian Church turns. And let's not be too quick to presume it to have been a question, the answer to which, would have been obvious: either to Peter as he asked it, or for the others who were gathered with him in the house of Cornelius the Centurion.

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Those of you...those of you familiar with the story of that Ethiopian eunuch—the one baptized by the deacon Phillip a few chapters earlier in Acts...

...those of you familiar with that story will know that the Ethiopian—at a similar moment—asks almost the identical question Simon Peter asks when confronted by the work of the Spirit in the midst of Cornelius and company. Remember that Phillip has been travelling with the Ethiopian, seated in the man's chariot, telling him the story of Jesus. They pass a body of water at which point the Ethiopian exclaims, punctuating his exclamation with a question: "See, here is water. What prevents me from being baptized?" Do you see how similar his question is to the question Simon Peter asks when he meets with Cornelius: "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people?"

And yes: as I suggested a few moments ago, we should not presume that the answer to those questions would have been as obvious to the people asking those questions 2000 years ago as they appear to be to you and me. In the case of the

Ethiopian, he was clearly a god-fearing Gentile but one who—because he was a eunuch—would not have been eligible for full membership in the people of God as constituted under the First Covenant, the covenant with Israel. And no doubt, when he asked that question of Phillip, he was aware that Phillip might well have answered by saying: “I’m afraid not friend; it’s one thing to tell you the stories of Jesus but an entirely different matter to admit you to full membership in the Jesus’ movement that is now being formed. Nice try: but no cigar!” Similarly, I suspect Simon Peter—when he asks whether anyone could withhold water for baptizing Cornelius and his gentile family and friends—I suspect Peter was listening carefully just in case one of his travelling companions had said to him: “Slow down Simon, good buddy. You’re getting ahead of yourself. Let’s hold off on the baptism bit, go back to Jerusalem, confer with the other elders...and get back to these good people down the road...a few years from now, once we’ve completed the paperwork.” But no: that voice of caution was not heard...not by Phillip, not by the Ethiopian, not by Peter, not by those who travelled with Peter, and not by Cornelius and his companions who became the first Gentiles...the first non-Jews...to be officially entered (as opposed to the Ethiopian who was ahead of them but somewhat irregularly entered) into the ranks of the Church, the community of disciples, the gathering of those who follow Jesus, the community of the Spirit’s embrace. The good news being that Phillip, by baptizing the Ethiopian...and Simon Peter and friends by baptizing Cornelius and his friends...cleared the way for the work the Apostle Paul would soon make his own. Work Paul undertook with at times terrifying passion and zeal. Work that would change the face of the Church. Work that would change—and continue to change—the face of human history.

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That having been said...without denying the world-historical consequences of that remarkable moment in time...

...that moment when the Gospel exploded from its strictly Jewish beginnings into a movement that would seek to incorporate every tribe and every tongue, every race and every culture...

...without denying the world-historical implications of that remarkable moment, let’s recall that the challenge this story places before us is a challenge directed mainly at the household of God: in other words, a challenge placed before us as the Church. However this story of the expansive, inclusive Gospel registers for us as Vancouver Islanders, British Columbians or Canadians....

...for that matter however it registers for us as citizens of the world...

...we are meant to hear this story, first and foremost, as members of the Church of Jesus Christ: a Church in which God’s restless Spirit leads

the way, a way marked first and foremost not by definitions of race, class or gender but by the embrace of a Spirit that is as eager to tear down barriers to the Good News of Jesus Christ in our day, as the Spirit was to tear down barriers to the Gospel in the time of Phillip and the Ethiopian, the time of Simon Peter and Cornelius. And the question the Spirit places before us...the challenge the Spirit puts to us...involves our willingness to open our hearts, our minds, our doors to provide welcome and hospitality not only to our kind of people...but to anyone who hears the Gospel's call...anyone who hears the voice of Jesus Christ and yearns to say to that voice: "Yes. Take me! Have me!" That is the challenge—the ongoing challenge—to us as a Jesus people, welcoming all who come in Jesus' name...welcoming all who have been touched by the Spirit's embrace...and knowing...

...knowing that wherever the challenge of the Gospel is found, there too is found the joy of the Gospel. The joy of knowing that we too have been found...that we too have been welcomed in...that we too have tasted (and will again taste) of Christ's joy...the Spirit's joy...God's own joy: which is to say our share in the never-ending joy of the God who came to us in Jesus Christ.

And glory be to God: whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation...in the Church, and in Christ Jesus. Now and forever more. Amen.