

Scriptures and Sermon for May 10, 2015

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

[Jesus said:] "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."

Let us pray...Amen.

The Book of Acts is a remarkable document: believed to have been written by the same author who wrote the book of Luke, it chronicles the struggles and joys of the early church at its very beginning.

And what do we find at the early church's very beginning? A conflict! A disagreement! An argument! What a surprise!

As the disciples and apostles began building what would become the foundation for the Christian church, there were some deeply held beliefs that needed to be addressed: the first and most important was whether the Gentiles, or non-Jews, needed to become Jewish first before they could be followers of Jesus.

I know it may sound funny today, but back then it was a passionate disagreement. All of the disciples were Jews first, and following Jesus became almost an extension of their Jewish heritage and tradition. And so in the earliest days, it was assumed that Gentiles, or non-Jews, would have to become Jewish in order to follow Jesus.

But in our Acts passage today, we hear about the time when the Holy Spirit taught the disciples a valuable lesson about who can be a follower of Jesus.

While Peter was speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening, Gentiles and Jews alike. Jews and non-Jews were speaking in tongues and extolling God. And with the evidence that even the Gentiles could share in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, it occurred to Peter that it should no longer be necessary to have Gentiles become Jews in order to be Christian. It was a revolutionary idea; it was a sacred and holy idea. And in that split second that Peter conceived of it, it promised to change the whole way believers could come to Christ.

Now, with 2000 years of hindsight, scholars and historians have been able to see that Jesus himself spoke with, touched, healed, and included Gentiles in his ministry. He did not require any of them to study Judaism, or the Torah, or even to worship in the temple. He found them faithful just the way they were.

And it makes sense that the Holy Spirit would be poured out upon all who heard the Word from Peter, without distinction between Jew or Gentile, because that is how Jesus acted.

But disciples being disciples, and humans being human, it took a near miracle from the Holy Spirit to enlighten them: all who wish to know God are welcome to the way of Jesus the Christ. All.

All are welcome.

And, after 2000 years of practicing Christianity, churches like Fairmount Community Church UCC are extending a welcome to all as well.

Whether a person has come from a Catholic upbringing, an evangelical upbringing, whether from Lutheran, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Non-denominational, or even from a home where church was not part of the tradition, all are welcome here at Fairmount. And I know in my heart, that if someone from another religious tradition were to express an interest in joining us, we would welcome them too!

We recognize that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are poured out upon all kinds of people, and so we welcome all kinds of people into the church. We not only benefit from the diversity of spirit, we benefit from the diversity of life experience and skills that come from welcoming all.

The one thing that is different about people joining the church today that wasn't present in the early days is the almost palpable feel of desperation that pervades many churches. There is a tension, an anxiety about the future that wasn't present when the church was just starting out.

But just as the early church had to figure out how it was going to be in the world, we, too, need to figure out how we want to be in the world.

Jesus declared to his disciples that they were his friends. They were no longer servants, but equals. Jesus modeled for us that in order to make people feel welcome, we need to show them that we consider them our friends. Friends worthy of our time, our care, our support, our resources, and even our sacrifice. I think we do that pretty well here at Fairmount, and if I'm allowed, I'll say that I am proud of those of you who welcome our visitors with a smile and a low key invitation to friendship.

Just as the disciples were reminded that Gentiles were receivers of the Holy Spirit, we are reminded today that our visitors, the seekers, those who come from other

traditions or backgrounds are equally receivers of the Holy Spirit, and the gifts that come from the Holy Spirit are equally bestowed upon them.

And just as the disciples needed to discuss, and maybe even argue about how the early church was going to grow, and how it was going to treat the Gentiles, we will need to discuss, and maybe even argue over how we will treat those who seek to join with us in the future.

We'll have to ask ourselves what are the parts of our tradition that we hold dear, and want to retain for the future, and what are the parts we can change in the name of extending friendship to others.

What are the sacred symbols that are worth saving, and what sacred symbols can be sacrificed in the name of future growth.

There's a church in the next Association over that is struggling with membership, like many churches in this day and age. They have an aging membership of faithful followers of Christ. Several years ago they received an amazing gift: a private collection of first edition books worth a fortune. The person who left them was a faithful member of their church, and wished for the church to have the collection. But there was a catch: the church had to house them in a special cabinet for display, they couldn't sell them, they could only keep them.

The specifics of the will prevented them from using the gift in the way that would benefit the church the most: repairs to the building, investment in youth ministry...the church is left to argue about whether they can break the terms of the bequest or not. Those books have become a sacred symbol, and instead of focusing on growing and being relevant to their community, they worry and argue about their books.

If we continue loving others, by sharing our resources appropriately, and by being good stewards of our resources, we will bear much fruit: for the body of Christ, for ourselves, and for our new found friends.

There is mounting pressure for local churches to address aging buildings, crumbling parking lots, declining income from pledges and fundraisers. All this is true. But if we concentrate on doing what the church is called to do, loving our neighbors, I really believe that things will resolve. But if we spend all our resources in worrying about fixing things, we won't have energy to do what we are called to do.

Let us not worry if we disagree over the next few years about how to best live into the future: there is ample evidence that the Holy Spirit will be poured out upon us, even as we debate how to be the best church we can be. Even as we debate how we can best love one another. Making new friends will bear fruit, the kind of fruit that will last.

Thanks be to God. Amen.