

“Celebrate the Love”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, May 9, 2021

Acts 10:44-48

While much is written about the first few verses of our passage today, for me, this week, the pull has been to its last sentence. Peter first asks, “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.”

They invited him to stay for several days. After the baptisms of the household members of the centurion, which was probably held in a nearby stream, and after they had changed into dry clothes, and put the towels out on the line to dry, they probably sat down at a table and shared a meal. And over the meal, they shared in conversations that would link them together in that moment. And one conversation over a meal, would be followed by another, and another. And community was birthed – not the old community of Jews there and Gentiles here, but a community where Jews *and* Gentiles sat together, and ate together, laughed together, and shared life together. And they stayed for several days.

The Holy Spirit did all the heavy lifting to get these people to this moment. It’s a bit of a long story here in Acts because we’re coming in at the tail end of it, but a short recap would tell you that before this moment, Jews kept to themselves, and Gentiles (non-Jews) kept to themselves. And there was no mingling together. There was no sharing of food because each group ate different foods. There was no sharing of physical space. No walking together. No gathering in one place together. Strict cultural laws dictated very clearly who was ‘in’ each group and who was considered an outsider.

And that is why this Acts 10 Chapter changes everything in the early days and movement of the young Christian church. We read, “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.” The Jews who *had* been touched by the Holy Spirit weeks earlier on the day of Pentecost, in that upper room in Jerusalem, now saw in front of their very eyes that these people in the Centurion’s household, *who were not Jews and then were not like them*, were now feeling **exactly the same thing**. God makes no distinctions. The Spirit is going to touch whom the Spirit is going to touch. As Willie James Jennings sees in this passage, “This is what God wants, Jews with Gentiles, Gentiles wanting to be with Jews, and together they eat and live in peace ... in a quiet corner of the Roman Empire, in the home of a centurion, a rip in the fabric of space and time has occurred. All those who would worship Jesus may enter a new vision of intimate space and a new time that will open up endless new possibilities of life with others.”¹

¹ Willie James Jennings, *ACTS: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 115.

You could say that the pandemic has certainly opened up ‘a new time’ with ‘endless new possibilities’ – a ‘new time’ of live streaming worship, and zoom meetings. When Stouffville United, as well as countless other churches, moved their in-person worship to a virtual worship experience, we expanded the definitions of what worship looked like. Up until a year ago, worship happened in a building at a set time. Now, people can ‘attend’ worship from their homes, at any time that fits their schedule. And more people have been able to join us, who couldn’t before because of distance or mobility.

But change in ‘church land’ doesn’t come easily. Here’s an example of how a church struggled with a change during the pandemic – in this case the Lutheran Church in Malaysia. In an interview with Dr. Deanna Thompson and Rev. Augustin Muthusami,² they discussed the difficulty the Lutheran church in Malaysia was having about the decision to allow Holy Communion in a virtual worship service. Rev. Muthusami is Chair of the Lutheran Faith and Order Commission. The Christian church in Malaysia is only 7% of the faith population in that country. Muslims are 60%, and Chinese Buddhist/Hindu the remainder. The 7% is made up of mainline denominations, and lots of other charismatic, Pentecostal assemblies. It is a small community and everyone knows each other. And so, the Lutherans were asking their clergy why they couldn’t celebrate Communion when their other Christian friends from other Christian churches were having communion. Rev. Muthusami said that the conversations at the Faith and Order Commission about whether or not to authorize online communion were not about theology but rather about ‘obedience’ as he named it. He said that there was a fear that the church would lose ‘control’ over the sacrament. If we allowed this, then what? People might take over communion and celebrate it everywhere. The Lutherans did decide to go to online communion but it had to be held within an official worship service, not privately, an ordained minister must celebrate, and in two or three years, the Bishops would decide if it continued.

Peter said, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people?” The church can be quick to withhold permission rather than *give* permission. Some of this is based on the ways the institutional church works. Meetings are held, reports written, we ask the ‘what if’ questions, we look at our budgets. And we can shut down, or even snuff out the initial spark that set off the new proposal.

Is there spontaneity in the church? Is there the ability to pivot in a new direction, especially when it is in a markedly different direction than the way the church has always moved? Here’s an example for you to ponder. And I want you to consider if you would withhold permission or freely give permission? Here is how a church in North America describes their worship services. It is the Union Church in Seattle, Washington. “Worship is our life lived in response to God’s love for us and God’s passion for justice and reconciliation ... That’s why every Sunday at our church is a little different.”

And here is how they are different. The first, third, and fifth Sundays of the month have worship with music, prayers, story, and Scripture. The second Sunday of the month is spent in small groups discussing the theme of the day and God’s activity in their lives. The fourth Sunday is described as worshipping ‘together through action’ as they come alongside others in the community, for example, to lead hymn-sings in retirement homes, make lunches for a homeless

² Church Anew Website. <https://churchanew.org/video-resources>. Accessed May 8, 2021.

day center, even rake leaves on their neighbour's lawns.³ In other words, they're not in the building during worship, but outside, in the community, serving others.

Would you say yes? Or would you be reluctant at first, wanting to ask a few more questions, or out flat say 'No.'

An indicator of a thriving church is the acceptance of challenges, where it engages in, as Loraine MacKenzie Shepherd describes it, "courageous risk-taking to move past the comfort zone of habits and familiar structures into the unknown."⁴ Whenever a church is called into the 'unknown', it is definitely the Holy Spirit at work. Peter walked over the threshold of that Centurion's house, into the unknown. And the Spirit brought him and everyone else there into a Spirit-blessed community. As Stouffville United continues to venture into the unknown of its future, God yearns for you to find community that will bless you, that will stretch you, that will nurture you.

Peter crosses the threshold of the Centurion's house,
into a new way of relationship.
New, yes, but not scary.
New, yes, and rather glorious.

For here there are less 'forbidden' things
and more life-giving things.
The food tastes better.
The words seem truer.
The light filling the room seems brighter.

He looks at his new found friends,
sitting there in-between his old friends.
And his heart burns within him.
For here with such clarity he is surprised he hadn't seen it before,
is Jesus, standing in their midst.

He gives thanks.
And turns to his new found neighbour and says,
Please pass the bread.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Jason Byassee and Ross A. Lockhart, *Better than Brunch* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2020), 46-47.

⁴ Loraine MacKenzie Shepherd, *Thriving Churches: Urban and Rural Successes* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2021), 68.