

Holy Interruption
Sixth Sunday of Easter
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Texts: Acts 10.44-48;
Psalm 98;
1 John 5.1-6;
John 15.9-17

I want to share with you one of my favorite experiences as a preacher that happens several times a year it seems. It's an experience that simultaneously keeps me humble as a preacher and in awe of what God does among us when we gather for worship. So here's the experience: someone is excited by an insight that came to them through the sermon that I just preached. I ask them to say a bit more about what they heard (eager to hear how my hard work has made a difference in someone's life) and they go on to share what they ***think*** is a quote from my sermon when in fact I never said anything close to what they are saying; never even thought it. What happened in them - the insight that sparked some connection between faith and life for them - was not my work but some beautiful synergy between the Word, and some part of their life experience, something they've learned before, and yes probably some small piece of what I said that set off a chain of connections to bring that moment of insight together. I used to correct people that I never actually said what they thought I said and now just celebrate the way the Spirit engages with us in ways we expect and in ways we don't.

I was thinking of all of this as I read the passage from Acts for today. Peter is preaching as he seems to do on every other page of the book of Acts. And in the middle of that sermon, while Peter is still speaking, the Holy Spirit interrupts what is happening and fills every person in the room. The people Peter brought with him to visit Cornelius are astounded. You have to track the context to understand their surprise. The people who had come with Peter were all circumcised which means that they were Jewish not just by ethnicity but also by religion. They were followers of Jesus but still living within the traditions and worship life of Judaism.

If any gentiles were to come into this newly emerging Christian faith they first became Jews (if they were males that meant that they were circumcised), then they were baptized in the name of Jesus, and only then would the Holy Spirit come upon them. That was the new order of things.

Keep in mind this was already a radical departure from their religious upbringing. The coming of Jesus and his teaching had already shaken their foundations. They had been struggling all the way along to integrate what Jesus had been teaching about the kingdom of God into their prior understanding of the Torah (the Hebrew Scriptures). Then they had to grapple with his execution and the equally baffling reality of his resurrection. And now they were creating a new community centered around the good news of God's kingdom of peace and love. They had adjusted to all that change. They thought they knew where the Spirit was leading but every time you turn around in the book of Acts there is another course correction.

Go back through the book of Acts and you see the Holy Spirit interrupting all over the place: interrupting long standing tradition, deeply held conviction, and established expectations. Much of what is shared in this book is the powerful movement of God's Spirit pushing against all the forces that would keep the good news from taking root among God's people. In the book of Acts we read about the Spirit pushing against the forces of alienation and shame that surrounded sickness and disease, the forces of tradition that lead the religious leaders to be suspicious of Jesus and his followers, the forces of greed in the face of poverty, the forces of communal inequities, and the forces of exclusion.

Anything that stands in the way of human flourishing is going to be interrupted. We have choice in these moments. We can look upon these interruptions as offensive and unwelcomed or we see them for what they are which is holy interventions designed to push us further toward the goodness and love and freedom of God.

From the moment Peter first began to pray on his roof top at the beginning of Acts chapter 10 his religious sensibilities have been scandalized. First there is the vision in which God invited him to eat unclean food -

something that he had never done in his whole life. Then some servants of a *gentile* centurion invite him to his unclean home. As he preaching the Word, the Holy Spirit falls on them. They have not become Jewish. They have not yet been baptized. This is the wrong order of things! Yet, at this stage his entire world has been turned upside down. Any sense of offense or scandal fell away when he realized with wonder and astonishment that there was nothing to prevent these fellow human beings from receiving every benefit and every blessing that he himself had received. Like the Ethiopian eunuch from last week, it dawned on him “there is nothing standing between these people and the full blessing of God except for people like me who withhold that blessing.”

The Spirit is moving freely and the community is simply asked to keep up. When you look at the dimensions of communal life being formed in the book of Acts it's pretty simple: bear witness to where you see the Spirit at work, share freely of your possessions, offer a wide open hospitality and be ready to let the Spirit scandalize your sensibilities and certainty....that's all! On the one hand, it really is pretty simple. What makes it difficult is how attached we become to our certainty, to our traditions, and to our expectations.

Let me give you one example of where the Spirit seems to be pushing against a force within our culture that is standing in the way of human flourishing. It's the force of communal inequity. In the book of Acts it was connected to a preference and privilege being given to the Hebrew believers who received more of the daily distribution of food over the Greek believers. In our culture, it is the systemic injustice that gives preference and privilege and the benefit of the doubt to people of light skin and European descent over the people with dark skin especially those of African descent. The cause of this inequity is complex and deep rooted and generational and absolutely devastating to those who are caught in the web of it – which is all of us!

While we have come a long way in addressing issues of race in our nation, it is at least illegal to actively discriminate on the basis of race; we still have so far to go when it comes to addressing the systems that keep this inequity in place. I don't know about you but I feel the Spirit interrupting our status

quo. We can no longer close our eyes and pretend that these issues are not going on. Each new city that rises up in protest is pushing at those forces that stand in the way of human flourishing. I feel the Spirit sparking connections for us as a nation in ways that no one fully intended. These horrific breaches of justice are all of a sudden connecting to the prophetic voices that have always been there trying to lift these issues into our national conscience. And now we are seeing it (or beginning to) and I pray that we are ready to do something about it. We can shake our heads and look at this interruption into our “peaceful” civic life as offensive and unwelcomed or we can see it for what I believe it is: a holy interruption designed to push us further toward the goodness and love and freedom of God.

I hear these texts in Eastertide from Acts and John and 1 John and I hear the call to become a community of love. I hear the invitation from Jesus today to be friends of God – not servants but friends. And then I hear the kind of friendship he has in mind: that we be willing to lay down our life for our friends. It’s a good thing that the Spirit prompts us with thoughts that are not our full intention. It is good that the Spirit pushes us and interrupts us and points us again toward the love of God at the center of our life. The call to worship this morning encapsulates the Word for us today:

Draw the circle wide
Draw it wider still
Let this be our song
No one stands alone,
standing side by side,
Draw the circle wide.

God the still point of the circle
Round whom all creation turns
Nothing lost, but held forever
In God’s gracious arms

Let our hearts touch far horizons
So encompass great and small
Let our loving know no borders
Faithful to God’s call

Amen.