

Easter 6B  
Peace, Seattle  
May 6, 2018  
Acts 10:44-48

## **THE DISRUPTING POWER OF THE SPIRIT**

During these Sundays of Easter our first readings have followed the ARC of Christ's mission vision in the book of ACTS, beginning with the culture of care cultivated within the discipleship community.<sup>1</sup>

...To episodes of healing and risky public testimony...<sup>2</sup>

...To stories about the gospel crossing social, gender, and racial boundaries...<sup>3</sup>

...To today's pivotal story of how the Holy Spirit disrupts the status quo, opening up new territory for the gospel.<sup>4</sup>

**YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES**, Jesus had told them, **IN JERUSALEM, IN JUDEA, SAMARIA, AND TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH.**

**That's the ARC**—an accelerating, spiraling circle of witness that propels the salvation story with centrifugal force all the way to Rome.

**NOW...** through the weirdness of the lectionary cycle, we actually hear these stories in what amounts to **REVERSE ORDER!**

**The Pentecost story** of the Holy Spirit being UNLEASHED in ACTS 2—which is the catalyst for everything that follows—won't be heard until two weeks from today. **So we need to remember that these stories we've been hearing take place AFTER that Pentecost event.**

**The point is**, it's impossible to conceive of these encounters, healings, conversions, and acts of civil disobedience happening apart from the powerful, creative, disrupting force of the Holy Spirit.

**"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth,"** said Jesus, but his disciples really had no idea what they were getting into!

**CASE IN POINT:** The excerpt we heard today, from chapter 10, which marks a turning point in the story of the early church.

Up until now the working assumption of Jesus' disciple community was that the **GOOD NEWS STORY OF JESUS** was intended first and last for God's chosen people—the Jews.

**It was a no-brainer:** Christ's dying and rising fulfilled all the promises God had made to Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures. So that's where their first missionary effort focused its energy.

**What about non-Jews—the so-called gentiles?** They were beyond God's arena of concern.

---

<sup>1</sup> Acts 4:32,34

<sup>2</sup> Acts 3 and 4

<sup>3</sup> Acts 8

<sup>4</sup> Acts 10

But then, strange things begin to happen.

First, Philip's ministry produces converts among the mixed-race Samaritans.

Then, God leads Philip to mentor and baptize an Ethiopian eunuch.

And when Saul of Tarsus, the Darth Vader-like oppressor of all things Christians, is himself converted, we begin to wonder where THE FORCE of the Holy Spirit will strike next!

**The answer comes in chapter 10, when Cornelius, a God-worshipping gentile and officer in the Roman army, has a dream. Remember the story?**

In his dream he's told that his prayers to God have been heard, and that he should send servants over to Joppa to find a guy named Peter, which he does.

Meanwhile as these men are on their way, Peter goes up on his roof to pray and has a vision of his own—a much stranger than the one Cornelius had:

- In Peter's vision the heavens open and large tarp is lowered to the ground—a tarp filled with all kinds of creatures that Jews are forbidden to eat.<sup>5</sup>
- But Peter hears a voice tell him: **RISE PETER, KILL & EAT.**

Now Peter knows his Bible, and thinking this must be some kind of test, he says:

**EAT?! NO WAY, LORD, I'M NOT GOING TO EAT ANYTHING UNCLEAN!**

The same scenario plays out three times. And while Peter's pondering what all this might mean he hears a knock at the door—and finds himself face to face with the guys Cornelius sent...

Prompted by his vision, Peter begins to connect the dots and so off he goes with them.

**When Peter arrives at the home of Cornelius' and sees all these GENTILES gathered there, the first thing out of his mouth is, YOU KNOW I REALLY SHOULDN'T BE HERE. He's clearly uncomfortable with the situation!**

But gradually, as he hears Cornelius' story a light goes on, and Peter wakes up to what God's doing.

NOW I GET IT! he says. GOD DOESN'T DISCRIMINATE! ANYONE FROM ANYWHERE WHO HONORS GOD AND DOES WHAT'S RIGHT IS ACCEPTABLE TO GOD.

**And almost as a punctuation point, God drops the Holy Spirit on the whole houseful, and Peter can think of nothing better to do than to baptize the whole lot of them on the spot.**

No one in the disciple community expected the inclusion of Gentiles to happen. It was off their radar. But the Holy Spirit had other ideas. The Spirit doesn't wait for our permission or our assent. The Spirit goes ahead of us, blowing past old conventions and boundaries; disrupting the status quo and bringing old promises to fulfillment in new ways.

**Fueled by the power of the resurrection, God's Spirit has no limits.** Let me share an example...

---

<sup>5</sup> See Leviticus 11

“I can’t explain,” writes Father Greg Boyle, “how the poor in Bolivia evangelized me during [the year I spent with them,] but they turned me inside out, and from that moment forward I only wanted to walk with them.”

He goes on, “This was a wholly selfish decision on my part. I knew that the poor had some privileged delivery system for giving me access to the gospel.”<sup>6</sup>

By the time Father Boyle returned from his experience in Bolivia in 1986, his understanding of what ministry was about had been reshaped entirely. The mile-square parish of Dolores Mission Church in East LA—his first parish assignment—had within its borders the most intense level of gang activity on the planet.

**Immediately he set out to discover pathways for reaching out to the surrounding community.**<sup>7</sup> Seeing the connection between school suspensions and the resulting uptick in gang activity led the parish to open an alternative school, and to welcome the young people—including gang members—who’d been kicked out of the public schools. With the school a new sense of “church” emerged, open and inclusive, replacing the hermetically sealed model that had kept the “good folks” in and the “bad folks” out.<sup>8</sup>

Some in the parish questioned this shift in mission. But when key leaders stood up and said, WE’RE DOING THIS BECAUSE THIS IS WHAT JESUS WOULD DO, the criticism turned to support.

Unlike many, Boyle didn’t view the young gang members as inhumane; rather, he saw them as particularly human, and vulnerable, and above all, able: so he put them to work, rather than into penitentiaries.

In 1992, when the acquittal of LA police officers for the beating of Rodney King launched widespread rioting, Father Boyle responded by creating Jobs For a Future, a revolutionary program that offered education, child and human services, and employment opportunities to current and future gang members.

**NOTHING STOPS A BULLET LIKE A JOB, became one of his hallmark sayings.**

Rival gang members worked side-by-side in Father Boyle’s first humanitarian business venture, Homeboy Bakery, which soon grew so successful that it launched the non-profit Homeboy Industries, and Homegirl Café which evolved into centerpieces of hope and humanity, providing food, job training and counseling, tattoo removal, and mental health services at its company sites.<sup>9</sup>

Twenty-five years into his ministry, he wrote the book, “Tattoos on the Heart” as an invitation to, as he puts it, “obliterate the notion that there is a them who should exist out of the circle of our kinship.”

In the times in which we live, it’s become increasingly tempting to draw hard lines between races, between religions; between political allegiances and immigration status; lines designed to include those who are on the inside and exclude those who are outside.

---

<sup>6</sup> Gregory Boyle. *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*. (New York: Free Press, 2010) p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> From an article by Celest Fremon in the *Los Angeles Times* March 17, 2010. <http://www.latimes.com/features/books/la-et-father-boyle17-2010mar17,0,94359.story>

<sup>8</sup> Gregory Boyle, op cit., p. 2, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Check out their website: <http://homeboyindustries.org>

**But when Jesus shared final instructions with his disciples, instead of giving them a list of people to avoid, he gave them something to stride toward:**

**LOVE ONE ANOTHER IN THE SAME WAY AS I HAVE LOVED YOU.  
IF YOU DO THAT, EVERYONE WILL KNOW THAT YOU ARE MY DISCIPLES.**

**When it comes to the love of Jesus, there are no insiders or outsiders; his love is for all. But let's be clear. The love to which he calls us is much more than a feeling or an attitude; it's a way of life.**

One of our central purposes as a congregation is to be a place where we can learn to love well.<sup>10</sup>

**The Spirit has called us to be a living, breathing LOVE LABORATORY, where love of God and neighbor are practiced in tangible, concrete ways; ways that witness publicly to the kind of Lord we worship.**

Our youth and family ministry, our education ministry, our social ministry, our music ministry, our prayer ministry, our Green ministry—and on and on...everything we're about as a congregation should express in some way our response to Christ's call and command:

**LOVE ONE ANOTHER AS I HAVE LOVED YOU.**

Every time we gather around this Table, we take in Christ's body so we can energized to bear this message as we go about our daily lives.

We may be located in a least churched corner of one of the least churched regions of the country, but as we go about our mission as church, our neighbors are watching.

**Do we have something more than another version of "US vs. THEM" to offer?**

**Does the experience of acceptance and welcome here, match our rhetoric?**

Does what goes on in here Sunday after Sunday compel and propel us to be witnesses beyond these doors?

**From the beginning the church has grappled with the question: How far God is willing to go in loving the world? The answer couldn't be clearer: farther than we can even imagine.**

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, thank you for calling us in baptism to a way of living and loving that awakens compassion within us. Thank you for reminding us of this vocation and for catching us when we fall and putting us back on the path again. By your Spirit, incarnate your love within our congregation, within our households, and wherever our daily lives take us. For we put our trust in your Spirit's power. Amen.

---

<sup>10</sup> Frank Honeycutt, *Love Letter, The Lutheran*, May 2013, p. 14f