

	Easter 5 18 May 2025	St. Catherine's Anglican Church Katharinenplatz 5 70182 Stuttgart <i>Anglican Centre</i> Olgastraße 56 70182 Stuttgart
	<i>Rev. Dr. Howard F. Perry</i>	
<small>Readings: Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35</small>		

It is a wonder that we are here this morning – because we are not Jews. As I assume we all know, Jesus was a Jew. He lived, taught and died as a Jew. His disciples and the apostles were all Jews. Peter and the rest preached to Jews at the beginning. But then something happened – and now – to skip 2000 years – we are here. Africans, Asians, Indians, Filipinos, Germans, English, even an American or two and probably at least one group I did not recognize and mention – for which I sincerely apologize.

What happened? Our text from Acts this morning tells us and I want to look at it with you this morning.

I

Look at what happened with Peter

The first part will require us to look closely at the text. All preachers are taught not to burden the congregation with the picky details of our exegesis. That is our homework, so to speak, the part of the iceberg below the surface that no one needs to see but the preacher.

This morning, however, I want to take you with me on my journey through this text, our first reading.

Our text is Peter's report of something he had done. The actual events – the dreams, the invitation from the centurion Cornelius, Peter's acceptance and preaching to his house, the conversion of the household, the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the new converts and their baptism – are found in Acts 10. Here in Acts 11 Peter is responding to critics.

Peter's response is the climax of a movement that begins in chapter 8, so follow me back to where the story begins. There we read that an angel of the Lord sent Philip to meet an Ethiopian eunuch, a wealthy court official, who was on his way home after worshipping in Jerusalem. Philip explains the meaning of the passage from Isaiah the eunuch had been reading and proclaims to him the good news about Jesus. When they come across a small stream, the eunuch cries out, "Look, here is water! What can *block* [κωλύει; NRSV: "prevent"] me from being baptized?" (Acts 8:36)

A couple of things could have blocked his being baptized. For one thing, he was a eunuch. They were not allowed inside the temple and were considered unclean, ritually impure. For another, he was not a Jew. Philip, however, ignored these hindrances and baptized him.

This event leads us through the conversion of Paul in Acts 9 up to the events recounted in Acts 10. Peter preaches in Cornelius's house, very effectively as it turns out. For as he is speaking the Holy Spirit descends upon those hearing him and they begin to speak in tongues and to praise God. Peter exclaims in astonishment: "Can

anyone *block* [κωλύσαι; NRSV: "withhold"] the water for baptizing these people who have received the Spirit just as we have?" (Acts 10:47). Peter decides "No" and orders his associates to baptize them all. Afterwards, he accepts the invitation to stay for several days. This was also unheard of.

As we have heard in the reading, the events related in Acts 10 had reached Jerusalem before Peter did. Peter's circumcised, Jewish brothers were not amused. Fascinatingly, they did not object to his preaching to the uncircumcised, not even to his baptizing them. Instead, they say, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and *eat with them*?" Their objection makes clear that the tradition of Jews keeping distance between themselves and gentiles, focused primarily on issues of food purity and table fellowship. The food had to be kosher and you never could be sure what would end up on the table of a gentile household.

In defense, Peter re-tells and interprets the story they had already heard. In what had happened Peter recognized a pattern and intuitively linked this outpouring of Spirit with baptism. The work of the Spirit was playing out palpably before his eyes.

All this led Peter to an inescapable conclusion, the climax of our story: This was God at work, doing a new thing. "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed [trusted] in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could *block* [κωλύσαι; NRSV: "hinder"] God?" (Acts 11:17) Peter's question neatly summarizes the import of the story up to this point.¹

We have heard, first, blocking the Ethiopian eunuch's baptism and, second, blocking the baptism of Cornelius's house. These first two cases of "block" refer to the hypothetical blocking of a human action, the act of baptism.

The third passage, the conclusion of Peter re-telling and defending his actions, is a crucial variation of the motif. We have reached the point of this long journey through Acts, the climax of the entire story.

Attempting to block the baptism of Cornelius's household would not mean merely to hinder the action of an apostle. It would not mean merely to oppose a humanly proposed innovation.

Upon further reflection, Peter says, No, it would be attempting to block God.

The Holy Spirit had orchestrated this whole episode, through visions and angelic visitations, through direct instructions to Cornelius and Peter, through opening the door for Peter to enter a gentile home, and most of all, through pouring out spiritual gifts on the gentile hearers of Peter's short sermon. All this is the work of the Spirit.

And so, Peter insists, he had no alternative. He had to recognize the correspondence—the metaphorical fit—between his own experience of receiving the Spirit and the experience of Cornelius's household. He had to recognize God's Spirit at work and get out of the way.

¹ If you look up these passages later, you will not find my translation. I have borrowed it from Richard B. Hays in Christopher B. Hays and Richard B. Hays, *The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality Within the Biblical Story* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024), from which I have drawn this argument, here p. 168-175. I have followed his translation of the Greek word κωλύω with "block" to emphasize the climax in Peter's words to his critics.

Peter's critics in Jerusalem, hearing his account, were silenced. After pondering the story for a moment, they too began praising God and drew the inevitable conclusion: "Then God has given even to the gentiles the repentance [μετάνοια: transformation of the mind] that leads to life" (Acts 11:18). So they too stood aside and acknowledged the Spirit's work.

II

What this all means for us now

a

Peter saw that the Spirit worked in ways and in places that he did not expect. What task does he leave us?

Our task is simply to follow in Peter's footsteps, to recognize where the Spirit is pushing our boundaries! Peter (and Paul, by the way) had to learn that God's mercy was not limited by membership in a certain community defined by what one eats and does not eat or certain traditional, very important rituals. They had to learn to think outside of the box.

Today we need to discern where the Spirit is leading us to think outside of the box.

God's mercy is wide. We don't know where it is going to lead us. Throughout the history of the peoples of God, God's mercy has pushed us. It has expanded boundaries and torn down walls like the one between Jews and gentiles. It can lead us to places and to thoughts and to positions on theological and political issues that we had not expected.

The working of the Spirit, the expansion of God's mercy can lead us to recognize that we were wrong. It can lead us to change our minds. It can demand of us that we toss out ideas, concepts, ways of living and treating people that we feel very comfortable with.

And that is scary.

Discerning the workings of the Spirit and moving to the new, expanded boundaries of God's mercy demands trust. It challenges our faith – but only when we misunderstand faith. Faith is not slavish adherence to concepts and ideas that we hold dear, regardless of how old they are or who may have passed them down to us.

Faith is trust, trust in God, in the workings of the Holy Spirit. Faith is an adventure. We never know where and how an adventure will end, regardless of how well prepared we may be. Uncertainty is inseparable from adventure. But when we have trust in God, we have trust that the adventure of discipleship will not end in disaster – although it will most certainly not end as we had expected.

b

And this uncertainty is what scares fundamentalists. They want an immovable, infallible foundation – authorities that are beyond question. They want security, as we all do, as we all need. There is indeed security in clear role models, sexual stereotypes, a black-and-white view of right and wrong. But this is the thinking of persons who at a very deep level lack faith. They lack trust in God the Holy Spirit to lead us, to guide us.

Moreover, when we insist that we understand everything, that we know exactly what God wants, we are limiting God. We are far down the path to making God in our own image.

Let me be very clear here. I am not speaking about their relationship to God. That is a private, intimate matter between them and God. I have no knowledge of that and I have no right to judge that. I am speaking about their theology, their way of thinking and living.

The theologian Karl Barth once observed, a theologian – and as Christians we are all theologians – does not just ask “what the apostles and prophets said, but what we must say on the basis of the apostles and prophets.”²

When we take the apostles and the prophets seriously, we may have to move beyond them. As Peter experienced, the Spirit may lead us beyond them as the Spirit led him beyond the Mosaic law.

Conclusion

A consequence of the widening of God’s mercy, of Peter’s courage to follow the lead of the Spirit and the insight he gained we can see this morning. All we have to do is look around us. When we see the worshipers of different ethnic groups with different cultural backgrounds, we see what can come from trusting in the widening of God’s mercy, in following the lead of the Spirit to think outside the box and push our boundaries.

Let us rejoice in our diversity and enjoy it this morning – and continue in Peter’s footsteps.

Amen!

² *Church Dogmatics I/1*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (London: T & T Clark, 1975), 16.