

“The Joy of Joining”¹
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I wonder: if church going folks were polled and asked about the most radical, the most revolutionary stories of our faith, whether Acts 10 would make the list. Here is my sneaking suspicion: if Christian churches really understood the contents of Acts 10, many might not want it included. Many might just throw up their hands in disgust and quit. I know that sounds provocative. I intend it to be provocative. Why? Because what God’s Spirit is up to in Acts 10 is tremendously, rip-roaringly provocative. And you know what? The greatest event, the most radical and astounding detail of all is in what you might think is a throwaway line at the tail end of vs. 48: “Then they invited him to stay for several days.”

There is a marvelous children’s curriculum, called Godly Play, that has a lesson about the church year. The lesson uses a circle and small little, colored wood blocks or felt squares, to be placed around the circle. For instance, to teach children about the purple seasons of Advent and Lent there are, respectively, four and six little purple blocks placed around the circle. There are seven white blocks for the season of Easter and 1 white block for Christmas. Filling in much of the rest of the circle are many green blocks, which are used to represent all the weeks of the church year that are considered “ordinary time” or, as the curriculum says, the “great green growing seasons.”

There is one other block in the circle, however. It is the red block for Pentecost Sunday. (Now, I know we are still 2 Sundays from Pentecost, but stick with me here). When the Godly Play storyteller comes to explaining that part of the church year, they pretend to get burned when they go to pick up the red block. They start to pick it up and then suddenly drop it and blow on their fingers, as if to cool them down. The storyteller notes that the mystery of Easter is so great that it keeps going for seven Sundays. But they also note that we need all those Sundays to get ready to for the great mystery of Pentecost, which is so very hot and wild and unrestrained.

Our story in Acts 10 is sometimes referred to as the Gentile Pentecost. After the Jerusalem Pentecost in Acts 2, we discover the other revolutionary movement of the Spirit: which now falls on Gentiles. This is mysterious indeed. This Pentecost, like the red Pentecost block in the church calendar, is also red hot, with the unrestrained movement and power of

¹ My reading of Acts has been tremendously shaped by the scholarship and preaching of theologian Willie James Jennings. I borrow concepts and work with phrasing and ideas that come from him. I do with deep gratitude for the way it has helped me to become a better follower of Jesus. I commend to you two works of Jennings’ that I draw from in this sermon: Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Westminster John Knox Press, 2017) and “A God Who Joins” a sermon given on April 17, 2015 at Louisville Seminary, which you can listen to here: <https://caldwellchapel.blogspot.com/2015/04/a-god-who-joins.html>.

the Spirit to join together those previously separated from each other. The Gentile Pentecost shows us that transgressing boundaries and separations is in fact the divine design of God.

But there is another provocative element of Acts 10. It is also the origin story of every Christian. I'm sure many of you have origin stories that are special and unique to your family. Stories that get told and retold at family gatherings. Stories that have been passed down about your roots and your ancestors. Stories that give shape to your identity and a vision for how you live in the world.

As Christians, Acts 10 is our origin story. That is: the place, within the story of our faith, where we enter. And by "we" I mean all of us Gentiles—those not born of Israel, those not Jewish. We usually don't think of ourselves as Gentiles. But that is what we are. Yes, we are Christians. But we are Gentile Christians. And that means, as theologian Willie Jennings says, we are those who have entered the story of another people. Here, we learn not only about our past, but also our future.

Acts 10 is the great reminder to all Gentile Christians that we enter what we now call the Christian faith on the plea of God. Earlier in the chapter, Peter resists the will of God and the way of the Spirit. Peter, a pious, believing Jew is repulsed by the vision of the descending sheet filled with all sorts of unclean animals.

We, Gentiles, are the repulsive thing on that sheet. We are the ones who are unclean, those who are not to be trusted, not to be associated with. But that is not the only thing we are. We are also those God was fighting for. In Acts 10, God is fighting for us—fighting for our entry into God's story.

God is essentially saying to Peter: Please accept into your life those who you would prefer not to be in your life. Go to those who you have been taught by your faith not to desire. And so, when, at last, the Gentiles invite Peter to stay with them for several days, we know that the transgressive, unrestrained, radical, and disruptive Spirit of God has brought together those who would have never joined together apart from the movement of God. The fact that there was an invitation, and that it was accepted, is the truly joyful and remarkable thing signaling that life together has begun. We learn here that there is true joy in the joining that comes on the other side of the holy struggle.

Friends, Acts 10 is such a good reminder that the Spirit is always pressing the followers of Jesus to do something they don't want to do. God's Spirit is always pressing us to join with people we would prefer to avoid.

And yet, you and I know that this is not how we experience church. Most churches are highly segregated. Most churches are a study in sameness. Sameness is comfortable. Sameness gives us a sense of safety and normalcy. Sameness is the way we live our lives outside the church, in where we live and work and shop and play.

But, make no mistake, the cult of sameness, our preoccupation with those of the same “color, kin, and kind,” must not be the operating value in our churches.

That is why we need Acts 10 to show us that we have a different legacy. We are those who have been brought in, even though we were the repulsive ones. God fought for us and shared the Spirit with us. And that means that joining with those different than us must always be our work and guiding value in the church.

It is so easy to be lulled into believing the lie that love of those different than us somehow means loss. But love does not mean loss. On the contrary, our very identity as Christians is the constant expansion of our identities without loss. Not to struggle and fight for this in our faith community is, to be blunt, to resist the Holy Spirit and the will of God.

But to commit ourselves to this holy struggle, recognizing, as we do, that while we may not yet find it pleasurable, we are nonetheless being faithful and moving towards the future God has for us.

And so I ask you now to enter into an imaginative exercise with me. If you're comfortable, I invite you to close your eyes: Bring to your mind's eye, those who you would prefer God not have us join with. Maybe it's the LGBTQ community—gay and queer families and folks, or transgender individuals. Or maybe it is those who are younger than you, a different generation, who sees life differently, interacts differently. What do they look like? Put them into your mind? Maybe it's those who are spiritual but not religious. Or those who don't appreciate traditional ways of worship—organs and hymns, bulletins, and pews. Maybe it's those whose cultural norms, maybe because of family background, life experience, economics, ability or race, are very, very different than yours. Maybe it's those you have chosen, intentionally, not to share a neighborhood with. Maybe it's those who don't see life through your lens—whose sense of decency and respect are expressed differently than you. Whoever it is for you, put them in your mind's eye.

Now, replace that image with your own and imagine yourself on that sheet of repulsive things that is lowered before the apostle Peter in his vision. Now add back to the picture with yourself those who you do not want to be joined with. And as you stand together in your mind's eye, imagine the Spirit, maybe as a tongue of fire or dove, resting in or on or above all of you. Now imagine you are all standing together in a pool, being baptized into the life of Jesus. Now, imagine your favorite way of gathering and having fellowship. Imagine where it is—maybe your backyard, or a family member's dining room table, maybe the church fellowship hall, maybe the beach. Now imagine you and those you'd rather not do life with joining together there for fellowship, belonging, and community. Imagine that in this gathering, there is not a lot of sameness. Imagine the awkwardness that might present itself, or give you butterflies, or make you uncomfortable. But imagine that this gathering is truly joyful. Imagine God's Spirit showing up and bringing joy in the mess of it all. Now open your eyes. This, dear church, is our future. May God so shape and mold our desires anew that we discover God's joy in the joining, and love without loss. Amen.