

**Scripture Readings for the Weekend
of May 5-6, 2018**



Acts 10:44-48

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. ⁴⁵ 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, ⁴⁶ for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" ⁴⁸ So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

John 15:9-17

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹² "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I do not call you servants¹ any longer, because the servant² does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶ You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.



**South-Central Synod of Wisconsin
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**
God's work. Our hands.

Synod Assembly 2018

Sermon from Bishop Mary Froiland

Grace and Peace, from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

It's hard to believe this is my last Synod Assembly message as your Bishop. I am grateful for the trust you have placed in me and for the partnership we have shared in this good gospel work for nearly 5 years now. I will miss this work – and I will miss you, the folks who make this work worth doing.

So, it's my last sermon.

Let's see what our scripture readings have to say to us today about what it means to be Christ's church, particularly the Lutheran expression of that church in this place and time, together, for the sake of this good world that God loves so much.

I'm focusing on the passage from Acts today. Let me start by setting the scene:

We are in the 10th chapter of Acts, where we are introduced to a man named Cornelius. Cornelius is a gentile in Caesarea, a centurion of the Italian cohort, and a devout man who loved and feared God.

Cornelius has a vision about a man named Simon (Peter) coming to visit him as an answer to his prayers. At the same time, Peter, hanging out with his companions in Joppa, has a vision. The Spirit is certainly busy providing all these visions!

Peter's vision is about being commanded to eat unclean food. He sees a sheet descending from heaven full of shrimp and lobster and cheeseburgers and bacon, and he hears a voice commanding him to "Take and eat!" Peter responds, "Never! I have never eaten anything unclean or profane!" And the voice reprimands him, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane!"

This vision is a challenge to Peter's expectations, his understanding of what is right and wrong.

The story continues with Peter and friends going to Cornelius' home where Cornelius invites him to preach to his entire household what God has commanded him to say. Peter begins to tell them the story of Jesus – his life, death and resurrection. He preaches to them about forgiveness and new life.

Which brings us to our lesson for today:

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.

I was struck by that phrase, ***While Peter was still speaking...***, and I heard it in a little different way: like, ***In spite of Peter still speaking...***

The Holy Spirit, who orchestrated this encounter between Peter and Cornelius, between a group of Jews and a group of Gentiles, between people who considered one another unclean and profane,

falls on all who hear the word. Peter's still speaking – talking on and on and on – and the Spirit interrupts him, rushing in with a demonstration of power and renewal and transformation.

Our lesson continues:

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.

Then Peter said, Look at this new thing that the Spirit has taught us while I was rattling on and on! ***"Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"*** I'm not sure how that happened, I didn't see it coming, but hey, if these folks are good enough for the Holy Spirit...

So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days, and new community is formed among people who were formerly unclean and profane to one another. Because what God has made clean you must not call profane

In this reading from Acts, the Holy Spirit is teaching a new lesson. God is doing a new thing!

Well, maybe it's not a new thing. Maybe it's the same thing God has always been doing except Peter and his companions have forgotten and so for them it's pretty unexpected – astounding even! “Well, we've never actually baptized gentiles before, but the Holy Spirit moved ahead of us, acted while we were still talking so how can we withhold the water for baptizing these people?

How about that Spirit of God? It's definitely a force to be reckoned with!

John and I live in Edgerton. There's a lovely little creek that runs through town – Saunders Creek. It runs through Central park. There's a pretty stone bridge that goes across the creek. Our grandkids, Isaac and Elsa, like to play “pooh sticks” there. That's a game where you each drop a stick off one side of the bridge and run over to the other side to see whose stick comes under the bridge first. The kiddos can play this for hours.

Saunders Creek is a peaceful gentle little creek that does what you'd expect it to do. Usually.

Earlier this year we had some flooding in southern Wisconsin. Remember? Peaceful little Saunders Creek overflowed its banks – big time! It ran across Hwy 51 which runs right through the town. It shut down the highway. It flooded the park. The park benches were underwater and the purple dinosaur in the playground was in danger of drowning.

And Central Lutheran church, the church we attend in Edgerton, our church – located right next to the park – was threatened by flood water. Pastor Erik Jelinek put out a call to the faithful over email and facebook and Twitter: Anyone who can – come to the fire station! Fill sandbags! Save the church!

John and I were not among the faithful that evening (we stayed in and warm and dry), but 35-40 people did respond. Sandbags were filled and stacked around the base of the church, and it worked! No water in the basement! The church was saved!

A great story, right? I've been thinking about it in a different way, though, since I started working with this lesson from Acts. It's that line – ***While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell on those who had heard the word.***

God's Spirit moves like a mighty wind – or a raging flooding river. It's unpredictable, surprising, astounding! God's Spirit is powerful and disruptive and destructive and it changes the landscape in its wake. And God's Spirit is wild and free and exciting and transforming and unexpected and astounding, creating opportunities for new life. We get to be a part of that flow, that energy, that power, that joy!

But – metaphorically speaking - how much of our time and energy is spent sandbagging our churches? Keeping the Spirit out? Protecting what and how things have always been? Staying dry instead of walking wet?

We do a lot of talking about declining numbers in most of our congregations: declining attendance, declining mission support, declining resources, declining energy. We put strategies in place to renew worship and increase stewardship and improve congregational vitality. We do an awful lot of talking.

What do you think the Spirit is up to while we are still talking?

I've said it before (and this may be my last time saying it, at least in this context as your bishop), but I don't think the church is declining. The church belongs to Christ – not to us, and Christ will take care of Christ's church – Christ **is** taking care of Christ's church. But our iteration of the church - congregational life as we have known it in our lives - is definitely shifting, and in many places that looks like decline, or even dying.

But our iteration of the church is not always where the action is. There's a raging flooding Spirit outside of our doors, outside of our walls, trying to break in and flow over and through us, wreaking all kinds of havoc: Overflowing banks, shutting down roads, making new pathways, transforming the landscape, bringing new life.

And it's all going on while we are still speaking. And filling sandbags. And protecting our own perceptions of what is clean and unclean, sacred and profane. What is and isn't church.

Sometimes – more times than not – we need to open our doors and step outside our walls. We need to open our hearts and minds and imaginations to the workings of the raging spirit around us that is transforming and growing and leading Christ's church.

Church isn't going to look like we think we remember it. I know there's some grief in that. But there is a reason and a purpose for Christ's church that doesn't change, even when our structures shift and our landscapes are flooded.

The church doesn't exist to stay the same and keep us comfortable. The church exists to tell the story of Jesus: His death and resurrection; His promise of forgiveness and healing and new life, for us, for the church, for this good world God loves so very much.

The church exists to keep God's story of love and forgiveness and transformation and new life alive and relevant in the world. Because it matters. And it's true. And it's a story we have been entrusted to tell.

In baptism, we are splashed with the water of the Holy Spirit that makes us new and invites us to jump in the river, not knowing where it will go but knowing it is always moving, always changing, always rearranging, always challenging and sometimes threatening, always providing transformation and new life, always a wild and exciting ride!

Forget the sandbags. Get your feet wet. Get your whole body wet. Go with the flow.

And now I'll stop speaking.