

St. David's Presbyterian Church
Sixth Sunday in Easter, May 17, 2009
Acts 10: 1-8, 17b-18, 21-24, 34-48
Psalm 98
John 15:9-17

Sermon: "Full and Running Over"
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The love that has its source in God can never be bottled up. Rather the love that has its source in God is like a spring that never runs dry, a spring that cannot help but overflow the vessel into which it is first poured, must always be running over. The love that has its source in God flows through Jesus to his friends, and his friends are asked in turn to let that love flow through them into the world. "Love each other," Jesus says in John 15, "as I have loved you."

The love that has its source in God can never be bottled up. This Easter season is all about proclaiming in every way that we can that the reality of the living God which followers of Jesus met, and meet, in Him, could never be confined in a tomb, and cannot be confined by even the highest walls that human beings might build to keep that reality hemmed in.

On this sixth Sunday of Easter, then, we are reading about Cornelius, and Peter, and what happened when God acted in both of their lives to make it possible for the reality of God's love to extend to people that some thought would always be outside the reach of that love.

Act I of this story introduces us to Cornelius. He was a Roman centurion, in charge of the Italian Regiment in Caesarea, a Roman garrison town on the Mediterranean coast of Palestine. The Romans were occupiers, and hated by many, and yet Cornelius had proved himself a neighbour to the people his army had been sent to subdue. He was "respected by the Jewish people"; he and his family were "devout and God-fearing". The expression "God-fearing" refers to people in the ancient world who were very much drawn to the faith of Jews, who sometime prayed with Jews in the synagogue, heard their scriptures read, accepted the ethical teachings of the Torah and the prophets, and yet who had not taken the steps that would have let them be regarded as Jews – specifically, they had not submitted to circumcision nor observed all the provisions of the dietary and ceremonial law of the Jews. He was a generous man, who had given to the poor among the people among whom he had been sent as a soldier.

As the scene opens in Acts 10, Cornelius is praying at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. That is one of the two times of day when sacrifices might be offered, and incense burned as an offering in the temple. As he prays, he becomes aware of a messenger of God, who tells Cornelius that "your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God." The angel's words seem to fulfil the prayer of the Psalmist: "May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice."

That God was accepting Cornelius devotion in prayer and caring for his neighbours as a "memorial offering" was astonishing good news for Cornelius, but it agrees with the testimony of Scripture in several places that love for God and love for the neighbour are the kind of offering that pleases God most of all.

In the opening chapter of Isaiah we read that God says, "I have more than enough of burnt offerings . . . I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats . . ." Rather, God says, "learn to do right, seek justice, encourage the oppressed, defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow."

The prophet Micah asks "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? . . . He has shown all you people what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

And when Jesus answers a man's questions about what are the most important commandments the questioner responds to Jesus' answer with these words: "You are right! . . . To love [God] with all your heart, with all your understanding, and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

The angel's message to Cornelius, a Roman, a Gentile, an uncircumcised man, a man who could never have entered the Temple courts because he did not belong to Israel, is that the offering of a devout and generous life had been accepted by God. And then the angel asked Cornelius to send for Simon Peter, who was living in another community further south on the Mediterranean coast, in Joppa, in the house of Simon the tanner. And Cornelius does as the angel commands.

Act II of the story introduces us to Peter, the next day at lunch-time. He is hungry as he is praying on the roof of his host's house, and he is presented with a vision. We didn't read about the vision in the Gospel lesson today, because I expect you will have remembered the vivid image of it from Sunday School, as I certainly do. A sheet comes down from heaven, with all kinds of four-footed animals, reptiles, and birds. A voice says, "Get up, Peter, Kill, and eat." Peter is horrified: "Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." Like every good Jew he has followed the law written in Leviticus 11 that divides the animal kingdom into "clean" and "unclean" creatures, and commanded Jews to only eat those who are "clean". And in the vision he sees animals of every kind all scrambled together. But the vision returns, and the voice says to Peter, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

Peter awakens, pondering what the vision might mean. But he doesn't have long to ponder as the men from Cornelius' house arrive, and Peter is led to welcome them and to do as they ask. He interprets the vision as not just about the foods God had made clean but also about the people that God was making clean. They are Gentiles, but Peter welcomes them and forthwith invites them in to be his guests. They probably shared the lunch that was being prepared as Peter was praying on the roof-top.

That was something astonishing in itself. The dietary laws, and all the laws about what make someone or something clean or unclean, combined together to keep Jews and Gentiles living quite separately from one another. It was deeply important that you share your meals and your home only with people who shared your commitment to all these practices. And that kept Gentiles not only away from the table, but also outside the door. But on this day, Peter invites these visitors in and makes them his guests.

Act III: It is the third day now, since the story began, and Peter travels back to Caesarea with these visitors. He takes some of the believers in Jesus' way who were also Jews like himself, with him on this adventure. When he gets to Cornelius' house, a crowd had already gathered in the house. Peter makes the point that for him to associate with Gentiles crosses a boundary he has always observed, but that the vision had taught him not to "call anyone impure or unclean." Cornelius tells the story of the message which had come to him while he was at prayer, and Peter accepts Cornelius' invitation to come inside.

What an astonishing thing it was, for Peter to cross the threshold into Cornelius' house! That crossing of the threshold happens by the same power by which God rolls the stone away from Jesus' tomb and raises his Son from the dead. God's purpose cannot be confined, God's love penetrates the house of the stranger as well as the house of the brother and fellow countryman. Peter must go into Cornelius' house by the same imperative by which the Risen One broke the bonds of death and crossed the threshold out of a dark tomb into a world that was waiting for his promise of life.

Act IV. Peter began to speak. And what a sermon-starter he had that day!

"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right."

Listen to this! "God . . . accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right."

"What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God."

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

And it is under the banner of that astonishing and universal opening declaration that Peter then proclaims the Gospel of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. He bears witness to Jesus' ministry of service, healing, and liberation, a ministry made possible because "God was with him." He bears witness to the death of Jesus on the cross, and to his resurrection from the dead. He bears witness to Jesus' command to go out and preach. He declares that Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophets' vision of one who was coming who would offer the forgiveness of sins to everyone.

Act V. And Peter's hearers respond. They heard Peter's message as declaring to them that they could find themselves included in God's purpose, that they could experience God's mercy and grace, that they could be embraced by God's steadfast love. They experienced that embrace through the same kind of ecstasy and speech that Peter and the other apostles knew on the day of Pentecost. The words of Joel that Peter had quoted on the day of Pentecost were now coming true more largely than ever:

"I will pour out my Spirit on *all people* . . . "

There was no distinction of persons; the God who had made them come alive in the Risen Christ was also making these strangers in Cornelius' house come alive in the very same way. As they visibly manifested visible signs of the Spirit coming upon them, there could be no question but that they could be baptized as people that God was claiming for himself. And the testimony to Cornelius' way of life even before this momentous event really indicated that he had fruits of the Spirit, as Paul writes in Galatians – "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

What happened in Cornelius house in Caesarea that day when Peter crossed his threshold and preached there, leads directly to the Gospel beginning to spread beyond the Jewish community to draw people outside that community into the fellowship of those who were people of Jesus' Way. And so we rejoice in the story, because those people in Cornelius' house are our ancestors in faith, in the experience of God reaching out with his astonishing grace and love in Jesus Christ and inviting us into God's family.

So that is a wonderful blessing from this story. But there are other things for us to ponder as we consider this wonderful story of walls of hostility and strangeness coming tumbling down as God's grace bursts out onto a world stage, and the Gospel becomes good news for all the nations. We should ponder why there were walls in the first place, and why Peter and the men who went with him from Joppa to Caesarea found it so challenging to witness the walls come tumbling down. The walls had always meant safety; they had helped maintain one's identity as part of the household of God. There was something comforting about being inside the space where God chose to be at work.

That God 's grace began running over and extending beyond that space was marvelous in one way but somewhat bewildering in another. The whole system under which they lived seemed to give to Peter and his countrymen a way to predict and define the ways that God chose to act, and to govern one's own life in accordance with what seemed to be the predictable and understandable ways of God.

That God chooses to act in unpredictable ways, in ways beyond our understanding or explaining – that is both wonderful and scary. For some of the believers who came to Cornelius' house along with Peter, what happened stretched their experience more than they were then able to stretch their minds.

And yet the evidence presents itself to us. Sometimes you may have been surprised, as I have been surprised, that people who didn't seem to us religious, or orthodox, or connected in any way to the church, have come to bless us.

I think of a young teen-ager I met in a psychiatric hospital. She had inadvertently taken LSD, and was repeatedly oppressed by episodes when she was conscious of something dark holding on to her mind and heart. She told me about her brother coming to visit her in the hospital, a brother who hadn't been to church since he was a very young child, a brother who seemed to many to be irreverent and godless. But it was this brother who had come to her long before any chaplain reached her, and said to her, "I want to pray for you." And he did. And the darkness began to dissipate, and light returned to her soul. He was a blessing to her, because God is larger than what we can see or define, and God's Spirit is like the wind that can blow wherever it chooses.

In the face of such experiences, let us rejoice as Peter rejoiced in the house of Cornelius, as he saw with his own eyes that God was drawing near to bless people who had always been thought of as incapable of knowing him, and also to make them a blessing to us.

Let us in our time be ready for the kind of astonishment that dawned on the apostles when Peter told them what happened in Cornelius' house, and they were able to praise God, saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted the repentance that leads to life."

Let us in our time as in that time, be alert to the new thing that God is doing, his grace and mercy full and spilling over in all the extravagance of his love for humankind. Let us continue to walk with Jesus, and as we come to know more of Him, may this prayer of Paul's be fulfilled in us (and with these words I close) -- (Ephesians 3):

¹⁶I pray that . . . ¹⁷ . . . Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord's people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen. "