

WHOM DO WE LOVE? Mother's Day, May 10, 2015

Acts 10:44-48 (47) - Unison: Psalm 98

HYMNS:1) #558 "O How Glorious, Full of Wonder" 2) #427 "God Made From One Blood"
3) #429 "God, Bless Our Homes"

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: Sing joyful songs to God!

People: Alleluia! We are Easter people!

L: God has worked miracles!

P: Jesus is our joy!

L: God's love for us lasts forever.

P: Jesus makes us into one family.

All: Let us worship, in spirit and in truth!

INVOCATION & LORD'S PRAYER

Holy God, you have transformed us by the resurrection of Jesus. You reach out to us in love, offering joy and wholeness to all people. Forgive us when we restrict our hearts, and fail to love one another. Call us deeper into Easter, and as we gather to worship, teach us once more to abide in your love. We pray this in Jesus' name: "Our Father..."

SERMON

It's Mother's Day! 30 years ago on Mother's Day I was so frustrated that I was not QUITE a mother, as my baby had grossly overstayed her reservation by TEN DAYS! I was ready to be a mom, not a miserable hot pregnant person. Of course, nobody stays pregnant forever, she was born a couple of days later and this is a pretty fond family story. Parenthood has probably taught me more than all the rest of my educational experiences combined, particularly about humility.

I'm also appreciative for lots of "other mothers" that have come into my life. People who have fulfilled a mothering role for me or alongside me. The divorced and childless great-great aunt who raised my father. The grandparents and honorary grandparents and aunts and uncles who have made up my family circle and that of my children. And I think of others too. All the

wonderful people who've adopted children, and fostered them. The dads who are the primary caregiver in their families. And the really wide and in many ways profound family circle of the church, which certainly helped ME raise my children. I have also known many people for whom this is a bittersweet day, because of infertility, or a lost pregnancy, lost relationships, difficult childhoods, and many more. We honor you too, on this day, and in this fellowship, we find all kinds of unexpected opportunities to care for each other, to love each other, and to teach one another.

Which brings me to a conversation with the "Gary Indiana" Sunday School kids in the hallway outside the sanctuary where they were waiting before the Music Man show began. They were very excited, but also, as usual, full of great off topic questions! I had my church keys on a lanyard over my arm because I had no pockets...like this. (show) The kids were FASCINATED: what are they for? Where do you use them? So we went through them (show keys) the charm that says health and wealth and long life. The key for all the outside doors. The one for all the inside doors. The one for all the thermostats. The crazy looking Allen wrench for the crash bars. Then there is this one (show) and I told them, I have it here. It must open something, I thought it was important enough to put with these others, but now I have no idea what. So I have it but I don't know where to use it. Now as told them that, in my own mind I was thinking, why DO I have it? A key that opens nothing? it's useless.

"Wow!" said Jack Fernandes. "So it could open ANYTHING! It might work ANYWHERE!"

And I was convicted, by the open mindedness and open heartedness of one of my church kiddos, of narrow and negative thinking. Not that he thought that for a moment! But his "possibility" kind of answer exploded my narrow categories by taking a much bigger view. Which is what this Bible text today is about.

When we celebrate Pentecost, which we will do one week later than the calendar suggests, on May 31, we will back up in the Bible to the point when the apostles of Jesus received the Holy Spirit. The original baptism by fire! The experience that shaped them from a band of struggling strivers into the seeds of the church, the Body of Christ. From that experience, they began to preach and to teach and to proclaim the good news of resurrection as the evidence that God's Kingdom had arrived! And by baptism into the death of Jesus, those who were moved by the gospel could enter into a new kind of life and a new kind of community, Christ's church. Their original understanding had been that this was good news for the Jews, as Jesus was Jewish and his initial proclamation came first to the Jews. But it didn't take long AT ALL for this message of redemption to catch on with those who had never been Jewish, the Gentiles of the Mediterranean world. This was a problem for Jesus' followers, who wondered, were they supposed to have the spirit? Didn't they have to become Jews to have the spirit?

Acts 10 starts with Peter being summoned to the household of Cornelius, a Roman Centurion. Cornelius had been praying to God and worshiping God even though he was a Gentile, and an angel came to him in a dream telling him to get Peter to come to his house. Meanwhile, in the city of Joppa, Peter also had a dream. He had been hungry and wanted something to eat, and while someone was getting him a meal, he fell into a trance. It can be like that when you are very hungry. In the trance, Peter saw heaven opening, and a cloth with all kinds of food was lowered to the ground. A voice, that he knew as God, commanded him to eat the food on the cloth. But it was food that was forbidden by Torah law, by God's commandment. So he refused: "by no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that was profane or unclean." And the voice said to him, **"What God has made clean, you must not call profane."** This happened three times, and then Peter woke up. You can imagine his puzzlement at this vision! What did it mean? What was God doing? While he was wondering, the messengers from Cornelius came, and the Spirit moved Peter to accept their invitation to come to the house of their master, Cornelius.

The next day, when Peter arrived, he was greeted with an embarrassing amount of reverence, and had to remind Cornelius that it is God alone who is worthy of worship. Cornelius explained the circumstances of the invitation—a heavenly message—and asked Peter to tell him and the whole household what God had commanded be told. And so Peter gave a sermon, an account of Jesus' teaching, death, and resurrection, and the commandment for his followers to share this story.

While Peter was still speaking the Holy Spirit came upon all who heard it. The Jewish Christians who'd come with Peter were confused: were they supposed to get the Spirit? But here these Gentiles were, speaking in tongues and praising God, just as they had themselves.

Now, what came next was radical. And Peter got in trouble for it, with the Jerusalem church. And it is not until Acts 15, five chapters of events later, that this question will be resolved: is the Gospel for everyone? Aren't you supposed to obey the Law of Moses? It's, well, it's like a key on the chain that you don't know what it opens. At one point important enough to put with these others, but now you have no idea what it's for. Something that a person might have without knowing where to use it. Without using, because it's a mystery. But listen! I will tell you a mystery! It could open ANYTHING! It might work ANYWHERE!

Because that is how the Holy Spirit is. That is how God is. We do not have the power or the right....or, honestly, even the need, to limit God's mighty acts. We are not diminished when God loves people who are beyond our circle, who are not like us, who don't necessarily follow our rules. We aren't! Any more than Peter and the other Jews were diminished when Cornelius and his whole household received the Spirit. I imagine there was one of those moments. When everybody is looking at everybody else and saying, "what now?" They all turn to Peter.

Can we remember for a tiny moment how Peter used to be? How many times he messed up? How he denied even knowing Jesus three times right before Jesus was crucified? How he did all these things that really should have gotten him kicked off the disciple team for bad and unapostle-like behavior. Instead, Jesus loved him and forgave him and welcomed him. Peter had become an outcast by his actions, his bad choices....and he was welcomed back nonetheless. And on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came in flames on his head, and he was no longer the same man he had been. He was loved and inspired into being the rock on which the church would be built, and this time with Cornelius is one of those cornerstone moments.

They looked at him and he looked at all of them and said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" and they were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Later he would be in trouble for this, with the other apostles and the leaders of the Jewish Christian church in Jerusalem. But it turns out that the Spirit did not care about the false and exclusive categories, then....and does not care about them now, either.

We do not hold the key that unlocks God. God holds the key that unlocks us. It could unlock ANYTHING! The key that brings us into a new life no matter what's gone before. A key that is not only handed over when certain circumstances have been satisfied by human actions. A key that does not work only if its holder is pure enough or faithful enough or any kind of enough. That key can open ANYTHING! Thank God, it opens us.

So that's what I think of when I see this key now, thanks to the insight of a wonderful wise loving exuberant child. And how by nurturing those children, and lots of other children of our fathering and mothering God, I might be getting things ready for the Spirit to act. That's been what it's been like being a parent. You give them what they need, you love and care for them, forgive them when they mess up, and pray that God will move in their hearts, that love and kindness will soften up the place for the Spirit to work on their hearts and minds. And even, sometimes, that they will soften up the place where the Spirit will work on our hearts and minds too. Because the Spirit works best in community, where we love and care for one another, listen to and speak with one another, where we wait and share difficult times and joyous ones, where we have a moment to say, is this what that key is for?

May God bless us all, showing us times to welcome all people, ways to invite them to know the joy we know, and to show us the joy they know. May God keep our hearts open to the outcasts and the ones who challenge our categories. May God's seeking love find us all, and transform us all, nurture us all, into the people we were created to be, the family of God.

Amen.