

Sixth Sunday of Easter  
Acts 10:44-48  
Rev. Amy Starr Redwine

Our scripture reading today from the book of Acts comes at the end  
of a dramatic series of events,  
so I need to offer a little backstory.

At the beginning of Acts chapter 10, we meet Cornelius,  
a devout and prayerful Gentile – a non-Jew.

Cornelius has a vision in which an angel tells him  
to send some of his men to find a man called Peter  
and bring him to Cornelius.

Meanwhile, Peter – the primary leader of the new Jesus movement –  
is having a vision of his own. While he is waiting for lunch,  
he sees the heavens open and a big sheet float down,  
filled with all kinds of animals faithful Jews are not permitted to eat.

Peter then hears a voice say something to the effect of – go ahead and eat!

This is when Cornelius's men show up at Peter's door  
and persuade him to come with them.

Once they arrive at Cornelius's house, Peter starts preaching the gospel.

But then something surprising happens, which is where our reading for today comes in. While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit came upon everyone – even the Gentiles! And Peter wonders aloud, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit, just like us?”

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected president in 1932,  
in the midst of the Great Depression.

Not long after his inauguration,  
a friend came to see FDR in the oval office and said,  
“Mr. President, if you succeed in solving the crisis of the Great Depression,  
you will go down [in history] as our greatest president.

But if you fail, sir, you will go down as our worst.”

FDR looked at him and responded, “If I fail, I’ll be the last.”<sup>1</sup>

There are moments in the life of every organism and organization –  
from people to families to churches to countries –

when the stakes are so high and the challenges so significant  
that survival itself is on the line.

Sometimes we are lucky enough to recognize these moments –

to be aware, as Roosevelt was, of just how serious the situation is.

Other times, we only realize in retrospect

just how close we came to losing everything.

When we read these stories in Acts about the formation of the early church,

it’s obvious *to us* just how close this movement came

to never getting off the ground,

much less to becoming a religion that would shape the world.

But those who were there, those first Jesus followers,

probably had no idea the weight of the decisions they were making:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2018/05/01/607303543/has-the-partisan-divide-ever-been-this-bad-author-jon-meacham-says-yes>

whether to stay behind locked doors or go out among God's people...

whether to share the gospel with Jews only or with everyone...

whether following Jesus was more important than following the rules...

Although the answers to these questions may seem obvious to us now,

for those first Jesus followers there was nothing *easy*

or *obvious* about these decisions at all.

This was especially true for Peter, who was not just any apostle -

he was the one Jesus himself said would lead the church.

From the very beginning of Acts, we see why Jesus chose Peter.

He is a gifted preacher, and a wise and discerning leader.

It is Peter who recognizes that it is the Holy Spirit

causing the chaos of the first Pentecost;

it is Peter who is not afraid to speak on behalf of the other disciples;

it is Peter who believes enough in the power of God

that he can cure the sick

and even raise someone from the dead.<sup>2</sup>

In today's story we also discover that Peter has a gift for what *we* now call

*adaptive leadership* – leadership that responds to emerging challenges

that have no clear-cut solutions.

As much as the events in today's passage must have shocked Peter –

first the vision that overturns centuries-old food laws

and then the invitation to enter the home of a Gentile –

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<sup>2</sup> In this point re: Peter's leadership gifts, I am indebted to Pen Perry's sermon, "The Holy Spirit as a Pre-Existing Condition," Day1.org, May 13, 2012. <http://day1.org/3820-the-holy-spirit-as-a-preexisting-condition/comments>

he nonetheless keeps going, trusting in the Holy Spirit  
to lead him into an unknown future.

One evening the Russian pianist-composer Ignace Yan Paderewski  
was scheduled to perform at a great concert hall.

In the sophisticated audience was a mother with her 9-year-old son.

She had brought him in hopes her boy would be inspired  
to practice the piano,

never mind that he didn't want to be there.

As she talked with her friends, the boy slipped from her side,

and without much notice, climbed the stage, sat down at the stool,

and put his small fingers upon the keyboard.

He began to play "Chopsticks."

The roar of the crowd was hushed by hundreds of frowning faces

turned in his direction. An angered audience began jeering,

calling for him to be removed from the stage.

Backstage, Paderewski overheard the sounds out front

and put together what was happening.

He grabbed his coat and rushed toward the stage.

Without one word of announcement, he stooped over the boy,

reached around both sides

and began to improvise a counter melody

to harmonize and enhance the tune.

As the two of them played together,

Paderewski kept whispering in the boy's ear:

"Keep going. Don't quit. Keep on playing.

Don't quit. I'm right here...don't quit!"

Peter going to Cornelius's house may not sound like such a big deal to us,

but this is among the most significant encounters in all of Acts.

Since Jews and Gentile didn't interact socially,

it would have been perfectly acceptable – even preferable –

for Peter to say to those men,

*I'm sorry, no, I can't go with you today.*

*There have been too many new things already,*

*too many changes to the status quo,*

*and the laws and traditions about **me** interacting with **you** are clear!*

But this isn't what Peter says. He says **yes**,

and enters the home of a Gentile

to share the good news of God's love revealed in Jesus,

extending that love to a whole new group of people.

Peter says **yes** *before* he knows how it will turn out or what it will mean.

You don't have to spend much time in any church

to know that churches tend to attract folks

who can relate to Peter.

Churches appeal to people who want to do the right thing and

have the right answer.

People who want to know what the rules are and to follow the rules

and to make sure others follow them too.

We church folk appreciate order and structure

and clearly defined responsibilities.

Which means that, like Peter, all of us, at one point or another

in the course of being part of the church, are going to come up against

some questions that challenge our most basic assumptions

and defy easy answers:

Will the church be able to maintain a place of relevance in our culture?

Who will want to be a part of our community

and will we be open to including them?

How can we bridge the differences between generations in a way

that honors our past *and* moves us into the future?

Well, if leadership were easy, there wouldn't be a whole industry devoted to it,

with books and videos and coaches and consultants,

most of which take complicated issues and boil them down into tools

that, if followed, will produce the desired result,

whether they are seven effective habits

or four quadrants of productivity or five dysfunctions of a team.

And until Acts chapter 10, we could be forgiven for thinking

that leadership in the church isn't all that different

from leadership in any other organization.

Until Acts chapter 10, we could be forgiven for thinking that it is Peter

who made the church the church...or for assuming that it is us

who must make sure the church *stays* the church.

But this story makes clear: the church didn't become the church

because of Peter or Paul or any of the other apostles.

The church also didn't become the church because of non-Jews

who insisted that God's promises were for them too.

What made the church the church – what *makes* the church the church –

**is the Holy Spirit.**

When Peter starts preaching to Cornelius and his household,

the Holy Spirit cuts him off.

Then, for the first time in Acts,

the Holy Spirit shows up and pours itself out

on Gentiles, a whole new set of people,

not *when* they are baptized or *after* they are baptized,

but *before* they are baptized.

Which is why Peter asks the rhetorical question,

“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people

who have received the Holy Spirit?”

– clearly the answer is *no*.

It at this moment that we realize that Peter is not the main character

in the Book of Acts. *No human being is.*

The main character of Acts, the primary leader of the church –

then and NOW – is the Holy Spirit.

Which means this movement is not about us

– our words, our wisdom, our abilities –

it's about God's Word – Jesus – and God's wisdom – the Holy Spirit –

and God's ability to move us beyond our limited vision of

who God is and who we are called to be as God's church.

I hope it is a comfort to you – God knows it is a comfort to me –

that it is when Peter is doing what Peter does best – preaching! –

that the Holy Spirit cuts him off,

making very clear that this movement is about so much more

than whoever is the leader of any church.

And I hope it is a comfort to you – God knows it is a comfort to me –

that leadership in the church is not about

having the answers or following the rules.

Leadership in the church is about letting go of our assumptions and

agendas and allowing the Spirit of God to move, to interrupt,

to pour out even on the last people

we would ever expect God to choose as leaders.

*Even on us.*

When she was in seminary, a beloved pastor told Barbara Brown Taylor

that “being ordained is not about serving God perfectly

but about serving God **visibly**,

allowing other people to learn whatever they can

from watching you rise and fall.

You probably won't be much worse than people," he said to her,

“and you certainly won't be any better,

but you will have to let people look at you.

You will have to let them see you as you are.”<sup>3</sup>

If it was up to me, every person who joined a church, and especially those who

Took a position of leadership in the church would have to answer this

One question:

“Will you let people **see** you, even – especially –

when you don't have the answer or you've made a mistake,

even – especially – when you're afraid and uncertain,

even – especially – when you feel

the Spirit moving you

in a direction you'd rather not go?”

It's so tempting for us to make leadership in the church about *our* talents

and abilities and knowledge. It's tempting, but wrong.

Because really the only job of church leaders is to be **followers**.

Followers of the unpredictable, erratic,

and at times downright shocking movement of the Spirit,

which is, after all, the presence of God here and now.

And we can pretty much guarantee that the Spirit *will*

push and prod and pull us to go places

we never imagined we would go,

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church*, HarperOne, 2006, p. 37.

even places we don't want to go.

While that may sound much harder than following a rule book,

the good news is that when we are willing to follow,

the Spirit will lead us into a future we could never predict

but where we **will** experience

the boundary-breaking,

custom-defying,

all-encompassing love of God. Amen.

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