

Fifth Sunday of Easter, 2016 (4/24/16)
All Saints Episcopal Church, San Leandro
The Rev. Justin R. Cannon
The Holy Spirit: "She Moves in Mysterious Ways"

Today one of the readings we heard was from the tenth chapter of the Book of Acts, which is an account of the early Christian church. Before I reflect on that passage, I want to travel eight chapters back to the second Book of Acts, which gives us a verse that succinctly captures the Christian understanding of Baptism: Saint Peter preaches to the people of Israel, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." This one verse captures the essence of the Christian understanding of Baptism. The rite of Baptism, which was originally by full immersion, mirrors the burial rite in a way—in one, we go under and are buried in the earth and in the other we go under and are buried under the water. The Rite of Baptism is understood to be a dying of ourselves—by this, I mean, we die to a life that is lived for ourselves alone, with ourselves as the nucleus of existence, but it does not end with that death of self. If that were it, we would not come back up from the water. Within the baptism rite is a glimpse of the resurrection as we come forth from the water, made anew in Christ, as a being no longer living according to our own whims and fancies, but pursuing deeper communion with God—to live our lives as God's, seeking God's ways. Scripture and church tradition both teach of the sanctification that comes in baptism. In fact, Jesus himself says, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit." It is taught, much like Saint Peter's sermon, that in the rite of baptism, in that dying of ourselves and rising anew as God's own, we receive the "gift of the Holy Spirit."

Now that I've explained that very defined, definite way of understanding baptism, we have today's lesson from the Book of Acts. Often in my extemporaneous prayers—like those for people's birthdays which I do at the end of the service— I pray that God will surprise us. Well, this understanding of God as the God of Surprises is not unfounded. Today's lesson from the Book of Acts is one such surprise.

In this account, most of the Christians at the time were of Jewish background, since Jesus came to the Jews and his first followers were Jews. Today's lesson in the Book of Acts presents us with a group of Gentiles. The early Christians were astonished that "the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles." The Gentiles were not baptized. Just eight chapters earlier Peter had preached that in baptism one receives the gift of the Holy Spirit, but here it was clear to him and the others that these unbaptized Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit. And Peter's response to this is not, "No—this is not how this works: first they must be baptized, and then they receive the Holy Spirit." Rather, he accepts this surprising work of the Holy Spirit that doesn't fit how he previously understood things and responds promptly, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

For Saint Peter this was a radical moment of openness to God working in ways he really didn't expect. It makes me think of the U2 song *Mysterious Ways* with that refrain, "She moves in mysterious ways." That could very well be said of the Holy Spirit. Speaking of

surprises there's a poem I came across entitled *Heaven's*, which I would like to share with you:

Heaven's Surprise

**I was shocked, confused, bewildered as I entered Heaven's door,
Not by the beauty of it all, nor the lights or its decor.
But it was the folks in Heaven who made me sputter and gasp—
The thieves, the liars, the sinners, the alcoholics and the trash.
There stood the kid from seventh grade who swiped my lunch money twice.
Next to him was my old neighbor who never said anything nice.
Herb, who I always thought was rotting away in hell,
Was sitting pretty on cloud nine, looking incredibly well.
I nudged Jesus, 'What's the deal? I would love to hear your take.
How'd all these sinners get up here? God must've made a mistake.
'And why's everyone so quiet, so somber – give me a clue.
'Child,' He said, 'they're all in shock. They never thought they'd be seeing you!'**

I don't know about you all, but I think judgment is an easy thing to slip into. I see it all around, especially in this election year as liberals and conservatives clash, Democrats and Republicans demonize each other, and for some people particular issues become the litmus test of whether or not you deserve respect. True diversity is respect, love, and dialogue that bridges these differences. The truth is this, that none of us have it all figured out, and we are all still learning. This is why Jesus asked his disciples the rhetorical question, "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?" Basically, why are you so concerned with your neighbors faults and brokenness, and the areas where they still need to learn, and not give the same attention to your own?"

In today's story from the Book of Acts something was happening that didn't fit Peter's understanding of how things were supposed to be. Peter did not say, "These men are Gentiles, they've not been baptized, clearly this is a deception!" or "You all may think you have the Holy Spirit, but I've got the real deal!" He was open to God working in ways he did not anticipate, expect, or even fully understand—and rather than judge this situation unorthodox, un-canonical, ridiculous or absurd, he trusted God's Spirit at work in surprising and mysterious ways.

Woody Allen once said, "If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans." Tell him your plans. Tell him your expectations. Tell him how he has to act and move in the world. Tell him all your certainties, and these are the areas where God will break in and reveal himself to you in new and unexpected ways.

Interestingly, Saint Peter does not say, "Well, these people don't need to be baptized; they've already got the Holy Spirit!" Rather, he says, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" As he had taught previously, baptism was not just about receiving the Holy Spirit, but being cleansed and the deep dying of oneself to a new life in Christ. This encounter in the Book of Acts highlights the value and need of tradition, the structure, the rites and rituals in our

journey, as means for grace and sanctification—but it also magnifies how God’s work extends far deeper in ways we don’t always see or understand, sometimes subverting our expectations.

My prayer for our continued journey together is that we might remain open to God’s surprises. Not just that God surprise us, but that we might be like Peter, open to those unexpected encounters—with God, with one another, and with others we encounter in the world, especially those who are different from us. God is transforming the world, working by the radical and untamed movement of the Holy Spirit to bring about the sanctification of all, and to bring all things into perfection in Christ. May we have eyes to see this movement and may our hearts remain ever open to the God of surprises.

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