

This is What We Know: a confirmation Sunday sermon on Acts 10:44-48

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH OF RED WING·FRIDAY, MAY 11, 20186 Reads

This story about Peter is important for our confirmation students and our church to hear together. It's a glimpse into a crucial moment in the history of the early church.

I'll be brief.

Peter grew up surrounded by two things: water and religion.

His father was a fisherman and before he could walk, Peter knew life on a boat. When a shiny silver fish worked its way from the net to the bottom of the boat, young Peter would grasp the slippery creature and secure it back inside the net. He's fishing when he's called by Jesus. "Set down your nets, Jesus says, I'll teach you to fish for people."

Peter has a rocky friendship with Jesus. He's constantly second-guessing Jesus' actions and questioning why Jesus is doing what Jesus is doing. Peter is on the boat during a storm and starts to sink when Jesus asks him to walk on water. It's even Peter who says, "Jesus, you can't wash my feet! Never!"

All these questions and challenges Peter puts to Jesus guides Peter to a point where he can say—and believe—that Jesus was the Messiah he'd been waiting for. Shortly after Jesus death, Peter starts telling other Jews like himself about Jesus.

A pattern soon emerges (Acts 2:1-4; 4:31; 8:17) where Peter preaches to a group of Jews and Jewish Christians, more people choose to become Jewish Christians and are baptized and THEN and the Holy Spirit is "poured out." Preach, baptisms, Holy Spirit shows up.

Here in chapter 10, things are different. We just read 5 verses of a longer story about Peter. A good summary of that story is found in Acts 10:34-35 where Peter says, *"I really am learning that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him."*

I love that phrase "I really am learning. . ." It's so active; it shows faith as a process.

Just as he grew up surrounded by water, Peter also grew up surrounded by religion. Most of the Judaism we read about in the Bible, as depicted in the Christian Scriptures, is different from lived Judaism today. A couple of weeks ago Ed Rapaport spoke in our forum about how Judaism is a way of living and being connected and faithful to God. Judaism in the New Testament, and the Judaism Peter grew up with was governed by boundaries. Jews and Gentiles. Circumcised and uncircumcised. Clean and unclean. Sacred and profane. Things you could do on the Sabbath and things that were forbidden on the Sabbath.

In chapter ten, Peter is learning.

Part of his learning comes in a vision of unclean animals that God tells him to eat, part of his learning is happening right now. Peter is brooding over this vision and some Gentiles (not Jewish people) show up at his door. He agrees to go with them to their town and when he gets there, it's a mixed crowd of Jews, Jewish Christians and Gentiles.

Peter's boundaries are on high alert, but, Peter is learning. *"I really am learning that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him."*

Peter then gives his pretty standard speech about Jesus to the crowd and some Gentiles listen.

And the pattern changes.

The Spirit shows up, is poured out while Peter is still speaking. To this crowd of all different kinds of people. Some of them weren't Jews. Some of them hadn't been baptized. And the Spirit shows up.

Peter basically says, "Well, we can't stop the Spirit. Bring on the water."

To our Confirmands, I want you to hear today that you are not alone in asking questions about the religion into which you were born. Peter struggled mightily to figure out how his beliefs fit into the religion of his childhood. Over and over again, first through Jesus and then with the Holy Spirit at work, Peter's beliefs changed. He saw what had always been there- God's love for all people.

I see Peter in you guys. You ask good questions, you have doubts, you want assurances, you speak the skepticism we all have, and you are willing to change what you believe. That's awesome. I see the Spirit working in each of you.

To our congregation, I want you to see how Peter responded to these Gentile Christians when he sees the Holy Spirit being poured out on these people. These Gentiles were not the same as Peter. They ate different foods, had different customs, believed different things. Peter struggled with welcoming them. But Peter couldn't resist the Spirit, couldn't deny what he saw with his own eyes- God was in this. So Peter orders them to be baptized with water in the name of Jesus.

I wondered this week, quite a bit, about the word "order."

Like Peter, the Jewish Christians are really confused by the Spirit showing up here among Gentiles.

When 10:48 reads, So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ I wonder- was the order directed to the Jewish Christians to perform this ritual, weather they wanted to or not? Or was the order directed to the Spirit filled Gentiles to be baptized to seal the deal?

I don't know. But I do know that Peter sees the Spirit at work and tries to respond. He's still learning, still growing. We have other stories of that.

The church is still learning and growing too.

In a few minutes we'll be confirming five young people. We are not saying the Apostle's Creed because they don't all believe the Apostle's Creed. But God is at work in them. The Spirit is evident in them. Who are we to get in the way of that?

I am grateful for their questions and willingness to be here today even as they wonder if they fit in here, if there are others who think like them. I am grateful for the ways they push the church to welcome all people. I am grateful they will continue to be part of our church when they are confirmed. I'm grateful some are becoming members and some are choosing not to.

And I'm grateful that we are a church that has not only young people, but old, seasoned Christians who continue to grow and learn, doubt and ask questions, and keep trying to grasp the incredible love of God.

Amen.

So let's do that confirming.