

“Withholding Hope”

Acts 10:44-48

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I got wondering, as I reread the book of Acts to place this week’s scripture in context, how many texts I have ever preached from this book. I checked and found this is the fourth – in my 14 years as a pastor I have preached on only three: the calling of Matthias as a disciple to replace Judas, the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost and the raising of Tabitha, also called Dorcas, from the dead. Twenty eight chapters in this book and that’s it. Which doesn’t seem enough for all that is in here, and how powerful I found a fresh read on how the disciples went from confused, wavering, tentative followers of Jesus to the raising people from the dead, healing, life-risking, radically transformed followers of Jesus we find in this book.

I try to live from faith not proof, but whenever I am asked about proof, that is usually what I give, that nothing, other than Jesus rising from the dead, explains this change in the disciples.

They encountered something that caused them to put everything at stake, their reputations, their security, their livelihoods, or more importantly their very own lives, and seeing the resurrected body of Jesus and receiving the gift of the Spirit seems like they would do the trick. There are important characters in the book of Acts – Peter, Saul who becomes Paul, the women disciples like Dorcas and Lydia, but no character is as important as the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes down in wind and dancing flames and then moves out and doesn’t stop moving, leading disciples to places they wouldn’t otherwise go, to people they wouldn’t otherwise talk to, let alone be in fellowship with, and it is the job of the individual disciples and the job of the first Christian Communities just to keep up. The disciples become so attuned to how the Spirit moves, that they look for it, they wait for its movement, then they follow it, obey it, moving with it, even when it takes off in a surprising direction.

Which is what happens here in Chapter 10. Peter is in Joppa having raised Tabitha, Dorcas from the dead when God gives him a vision that challenged what Peter thought he knew about clean and unclean foods, that upended what Peter thought God thought about it - and this prepared him to see other things differently, more openly, to cross boundaries that were previously firm for him based on his understanding of God up to that moment. At the same time, a character named Cornelius, not here in these four verses but it is to him and his household and friends that Peter is speaking, received a vision that he needed to go and bring Peter to him to find out what he has to say. The Spirit is already moving in their lives when they meet, they were open to it, maybe even looking for it, then they listened and obeyed it, and then when they

do meet up, two people who are withholding nothing from the Spirit's call on their lives, then the Spirit really gets moving,

There were many moments where withholding could have happened here: Cornelius is a Centurion, a lot more powerful position with higher status than a Galilean fisherman, yet he was open to learning from someone considered "lower" by all markers of his day. Peter could have refused to go to the center of Roman, Gentile life, Cornelius is in Caesarea, Caesar, after all, because he mistrusts how anyone with wealth and status, without proximity to the poor and marginalized people he heals and serves, could be a part of the Way of Jesus. Not to mention the total crossing of religious boundaries, that Peter acknowledged earlier when he says to Cornelius in verse 28, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile, and then goes on to say but God showed me different." Lots of reasons to withhold following, or withhold his heart by going but not really being open to it, but then Peter says, right there in verse 47, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

Peter's rhetorical question is answered with a full stop no – if the Spirit is doing it, as is clearly the case here, there is no point in holding back, holding out, withholding, putting on hold what is happening, no point - as you would be as successful as trying to stop the wind from blowing. A huge barrier has just been broken down by the Holy Spirit, a multi-generational, centuries old high wall, its layers supported by culture, ritual, history, practice, prejudice, belief, even hatred, between Gentile and Jew, Roman and Galilean peasant, blown over by the Holy Spirit. Blown over because Peter and Cornelius were paying attention, and were able to keep up, despite what it could cost them, and if you read the rest of Acts, you will find Peter quickly being criticized and needing to defend what he does here.

Because here's the thing, when you are so convinced that you are acting on the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the scale balance will always be tipped in obeying it, even if there are very heavy things on the other side, like fear and risk and potential loss of security or status, and making people mad, even people you really care about and love. People like their holding walls, I know I like mine, and when others want to blow down them down it is hard to see past the same things that hold them up today – culture, ritual, history, practice, prejudice, belief and even hatred, unless the Spirit helps me and you and most importantly us together, to see.

We are in a time when the walls of our building are being removed and reset, and as we are gutting and clearing out, there are many fewer of them in here. We are removing and moving actual walls to create a more welcome, open space, to make more room for community use that may not check all the boxes of "traditional churchy things" to expand and include, to invite more in, in more ways. What a metaphor for what is also happening in the heart of the body of Christ that is Lewinsville Presbyterian Church, as we wonder together how we can work for racial justice and care of the earth and alleviate poverty's grip on our neighbors and respond to all manner of human need, within our congregation and all the places we will follow the winds of the Spirit as part of this congregation.

We have trusted the stirrings of the Spirit in this church this year and we have not withheld – in our giving to Deacon and Mission funds in the pandemic, in our abundant support of the vision of what this church can be for the community after our rebuild, in our creativity in doing everything differently during the pandemic, in becoming a Matthew 25 congregation, in our seeking a new Associate Pastor to knit mission, youth and young adults ministry, in a new class of elders and deacon/Stephen Ministers coming on board next Sunday, in six 8th graders preparing for Confirmation the week after that.

And even now, the Spirit is preparing us to come together in a mighty way, to follow its movement to places we don't normally go, ways of being in Christian community we can't see yet, with people we don't even know. The Spirit still works in visions, and I know some of you have had them and heard the voice of God speaking to you, and sometimes they come to us in ideas that seem to pop in out of nowhere, or thoughts during prayer, or reading the Word, or sitting here or sitting somewhere and connecting in worship through the ether, and then when those visions come together – it is like a mighty wind that will blow down anything that gets in its way. One of you might have a vision for our new building, or a new ministry or a new mission, or a connection with our neighbors, or a way to care within or without the congregation, and someone else is having a connected vision, and needs you to share yours, so that his or hers will ignite, will be in-spired with the Spirit.

Our job? Keep our eyes open, Be ready for the vision. Pray for it and ask for eyes to see where the Spirit is moving you, to show you what walls are keeping you from where the Spirit wants you to go, to the people the Spirit wants you to love and serve. Then when you get the vision, follow it and don't keep it to yourself, share it. See how the scale will tip towards the Spirit's leading even when there are fears and possible risks and comforts to let go of on the other side.

And that will give us the strength, together, to not withhold, but to find a foothold, to uphold, to holdfast to and behold all the Spirit can do through us.