



Westminster Presbyterian Church
 Knoxville, TN
 May 5, 2024
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
 Sermon: “The Astounding Spirit”

Acts 10:44-48 (NRSV)

10:44 While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.

10:45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles,

10:46 for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said,

10:47 "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

10:48 So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

“The Astounding Spirit”

The circumcised believers – meaning those of Jewish descent, made up the first church. Jesus, the Christ, came to this earth as a Jewish prophet of the 1st century. His ministry was in the backroads of Galilee. His followers were the 12, representing the 12 tribes of Israel. They were first. They were primary.

And so, in our passage today, these circumcised believers, “were astounded” when the gift of the Holy Spirit is “poured out even on the Gentiles.”

The Greek word the author of Luke and Acts uses here for ‘astounded’ means, according to *The Greek and English Lexicon of the New Testament*, ‘to be amazed...of the feeling of astonishment mingled with fear, caused by events which are...difficult to understand.’¹

¹ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Revised and Edited by Frederick William Danker, 3rd Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 350.

The author uses the same Greek word to describe the shock of the disciples who could not believe the women who found the empty tomb after the resurrection:

*Moreover, some women of our group **astounded** us, the disciples report, in Luke ch. 24.*

It's the same word used a chapter earlier in Acts, for the amazement of those who first heard Saul, onetime persecutor of the early church, suddenly became its greatest Evangelist:

[Hearing him preach] *All who heard [Saul] were **amazed** and said, 'Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked [Christ's] name?' (Acts 9:21)*

So, saying these circumcised believers 'were astounded' by the gift of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles in our chapter is a bit of an understatement.

It's not simple wonder.

It's more like a moment when life – it's customs, your expectations – are turned upside down by the movement of a Spirit that will not be contained.

You ever get that feeling?

More context is needed: Earlier in the chapter, the disciple-turned-apostle Peter has a dream, where a blanket full of animals, clean and profane alike according to the law, is lowered to the ground, and he hears a voice, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat."

Peter, a follower of the law, rebukes the voice, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean."

The heavenly voice responds, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Soon we learn this vision is not just about food. Immediately after he wakes (Acts says, "while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision,") servants of the Roman Centurion Cornelius, a Gentile, come to Peter and invite him to his house. Peter responds, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean."

You see the vision is not about food; it's about people. It's about who you can consort with. Who God names as acceptable. Before his vision, Peter had thought, there were insiders and there were outsiders, clean and profane - and he was on the inside.

The vision said 'No. There are only children of God' – Jews and Gentiles alike, children of God. For, "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean."

Upon entering Cornelius's house, Peter begins to preach to these Gentiles: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality," he begins, and he goes on and on for another 10 verses.

...Because that's what the church does, right? That's what we often think about, when we think about inclusion: 'You can come in, but first, we better tell you what's what. You be quiet. We've got some things to say.'

Peter thought he needed to preach to these Gentiles, those outside of the church, to bring them inside, to include them. But notice where our passage today begins: "While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word."

The Spirit interrupts Peter.

And "The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were **astounded** that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles."

Astounded. There's that word again. It means, having your whole world turned upside down. When God is revealed in those deemed less than, God with the outsiders, The ones we thought needed a good talking to before they can be included. Peter didn't need to preach. It was the church's turn to listen.

Peter, in his astonishment, responds, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" They are baptized, and a community forms. No longer insiders and outsiders. All, children of God.

We still do a good job of that, don't we? Drawing lines, I mean, between those inside, those outside. I wonder, where is your line? And where is mine?

I've mentioned Cole Arthur Riley's book *This Here Flesh* a few times over the past few weeks. It's an amazing book, a New York Times bestseller. Just about every Presbyterian pastor I know owns a copy. A few of us have even read it.

In the middle of the book, there's a brilliant chapter about callings, about vocation. Riley says, God's call upon your life, is not just reserved for pastors. In fact, it's not just reserved for professionals. It's not just for those of us who have the resources and privilege enough for school and training, or those who get to choose their work.

She writes,

What of the majority of the world, which does not have the liberty of making such a discernment? Do the little Black boys running the streets not have callings? And I have never heard a college student tell me they 'feel called' to work at McDonald's.²

She writes about her father. A Black man, who was a father by the time he was a teenager, who was a single father by the time he was in his 20s, and throughout his life and continuing on today, struggles with addiction in and out of rehab. For most of his life, he hustled in the streets.

Cole Arthur Riley asks, what about his calling? A man who wasn't given many choices in life, certainly not about the type of work he did, or didn't do.

Our country puts 1 of every 5 Black men in prison at some point in their lifetime, out of sight, out of mind.³ It's what Michelle Alexander calls *The New Jim Crow*. Is it not easy to see, the lines we draw, about who's inside, and who is outside – whether we acknowledge those lines or not?

² Arthur Cole Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us* (New York: Convergent Books, 2022), 51.

³ I incorrectly stated 1 in 4 when I preached this text: "One in five Black men born in 2001 is likely to experience imprisonment within their lifetime, a decline from one in three for those born in 1981." From "New Report Finds Imprisonment Rate of Black Men Has Fallen By Nearly 50% Since 2000, But Pushback Threatens Continued Progress." *The Sentencing Project*. Oct. 11, 2023. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/press-releases/new-report-finds-imprisonment-rate-of-black-men-has-fallen-by-nearly-50-since-2000-but-pushback-threatens-continued-progress/>

And yet, Arthur Cole Riley's father is the protagonist in her story, the hero even. Because of how he lived his life, how he was – despite all the forces pulling him away, how he was always by his daughters' side, by Riley's side.

The book closes, with an image of Riley and her father, dancing at her wedding.

Have you ever been astounded by the movement of God, pulling people together, and breaking down the lines we draw?

It is complicated, that, on the week before Confirmation Sunday, we see on the news every night police in riot gear arresting college students protesting the war in Gaza. I wonder, what are we telling our young people, about the voice they have, or don't have?

Every day in the newspaper this week, I read editorials condemning the antisemitism, vandalism, and violence breaking out in these protests, and rightly so.⁴ Such violence and hate speech is abhorrent, and only serves to discredit any movement for peace.

But despite the headlines, there is a movement for peace taking off today in this country and around this world. It's separate from, and greater than, the violence that gets all the attention and serves as a smokescreen by those who want to discredit peaceful and legitimate protest.

Because what else are you supposed to do? When you see tens of thousands of casualties in Gaza, half of them children, caught with nowhere to go, in a war that seems to have no end? When see your own country, giving lip service to peace while feeding the military-industrial complex without reservation? What else are you supposed to do? These young people are a voice crying out in the wilderness, an unexpected movement of the Spirit, made up of students from every religion, including Jewish, Christian, and Muslim siblings in the faith, standing up and saying 'enough.'

Have you ever been astounded by the movement of God, pulling people together, and breaking down the lines we draw?

⁴ See, for example, Nicholas Kristof, "How Protesters Can Actually Help Palestinians." *The New York Times*. March 1, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/01/opinion/student-protests-gaza.html>

It's Cornelius and his household, interrupting the church's sermon in an ecstatic movement of the Spirit.

It's Cole Arthur Riley's father, a man many of us would walk past as another street hustler, become the hero of one of the most widely read religious books last year.

It's students across this county, who are being discredited by police, politicians, and extremists in their ranks every day, still calling for an end to a war too many in this country seem to have forgotten.

Everywhere you turn, the Spirit shows up, brings people together, and tears down walls.

It's not just others we keep out, is it? I think it's something about church. From its very first days, there were walls built around who was in, and who was out. Let's face it, churches have never stopped building walls, around who is in, and who is out. Peter the insider, Cornelius the outsider. When that's baked into the system, sometimes we can't help wonder, 'Where do I stand?'

Sometimes we take the place of Peter, building walls around the church. But let's be honest, other days we're Cornelius. Looking in from the outside. Tell me, do you ever feel like an outsider?

It doesn't take much. An illness. A life-change. An argument with a trusted friend. Or even, just a long day. Or long month. Or a long year.

And you find, there's a part of you that wonders, is God still with me? Does God still speak to me? Can God still use me?

We make promises at the font. We will make those promises again, with 3 of our youth, in just a little while. Many of us were too young to remember our baptism. Many of us too young to remember, ministers proclaiming that God's love for us is never-ending.

We were too young to remember. And it's so easy to forget. Somewhere along the way, we forget.

We forget that God can speak, that God is speaking, speaking even to you, even through you.

We forget so easily.

But here the thing - the Spirit tears down the walls we build:

You see it every day:

- 12 teenagers come and say they have heard that same Spirit speaking to our lives.
- 3 youth come forward to the waters of Baptism, each from a different family.

You know, I've been ordained for 7 years.

I've never led a Baptism with 3 families before.

I had to look up how to do it.

Over and over, we have been astounded by the movement of God, bringing people together, and breaking down the lines we draw.

Can you still be astounded?

- by a love that will never leave your side;
- by a grace that has no end and knows no boundary;
- by a consolation that surrounds the weary and brokenhearted;
- by a voice for justice that cries out, and cries out, and cries out, every day for those pushed aside.

After the Baptisms, today,

After the confirmations,

We will share at Table together. You will walk by this font.

Touch its waters. Bring them to your forehead.

- Remember your baptism.
- Remember that grace, poured over your head.
- Remember, the Spirit that tears down our walls, and brings us together, again, and again, and again.
 - No longer insiders and outsiders. All children of God.
- Remember, and be astounded. Amen.