

## “Who Can Withhold?” (Sunday, May 9, 2021)

Acts 15:44-48

A sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

Prayer: Holy God, we come into this moment of worship rejoicing in the love and grace you have shown us through your Son, Jesus Christ. Thank you, God, for this moment. Thank you for Jesus. Help us to listen for your love that is flowing into our lives even now. Open the hearts that have been scarred and jaded by the struggles of life. Open the ears that have heard too many promises made and then broken. Pry open the minds bound up by our own preconceptions and misconceptions of your amazing grace. Give us to know you and your love for the world, the same love that you gave us in Jesus. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you this day. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Some of you may remember the animated movie *Shrek* which made its debut in 2001. It was a story about a gruesome, yet good-hearted ogre who wanted nothing more than to be left alone. In the story, *Shrek* found himself entangled in a plot to save a princess that led him to discover true love and the importance of friendship. There’s a line in the movie that, surprisingly, applies to the kind of sermon I have for today. The words are uttered by Shrek as he tries to tell his annoying friend, Donkey, that there’s more to ogres than meets the eye. They are complex creatures: “Ogres are like onions...,” he explains, “They have layers. OGRES have layers. Onions have layers... We both have layers.”<sup>1</sup>

This morning’s sermon is what I will call an “onion sermon.” It has layers. We are going to have to peel back some layers of the scripture today in order to get at the heart of what’s going on.

- I don’t know if you’ve ever heard an “onion sermon” before.
- I don’t know if anyone has given one before.
- I know I’ve never written one before this.

So we may be making history today—who knows?

The first layer begins with God, working through the Apostle Peter. Peter was speaking to a group of people who had gathered to hear him talk. Luke, the author of Acts, tells us:

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. 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, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God.

There are a few things here we ought to find astounding ourselves, beginning with this:

- The Holy Spirit came upon all who heard the word before Peter was done talking. Peter didn’t get to finish his sermon. No chance for him to issue an altar call; he didn’t need to ask folks to accept Christ into their lives. Peter couldn’t even get to the “Amen” before God started changing their lives. The Holy Spirit was way ahead of Peter on this one. While Peter was still talking about God, the Spirit was moving.
- The evidence that the Spirit was working was that the Gentiles—the non-Jews—began speaking in tongues and praising God. Speaking in tongues is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is not a common gift, but it is recognized as a one that comes from God. The tongues referred to here are not foreign languages as we normally think of them like German, French, or Chinese. Rather, it is a spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from *Shrek*, movie quote DB.com, article on internet, [https://www.moviequotedb.com/movies/shrek/quote\\_21213.html](https://www.moviequotedb.com/movies/shrek/quote_21213.html), accessed 6 May 2021.

language that offers praise to God. There are churches today, such as the Pentecostal and charismatic churches, that place great emphasis on speaking in tongues as a mark of God's presence and work in a believer. In Peter's time and place, it was the unbaptized Gentiles who were given this gift as they heard Peter speaking.

- And that is what led to the astonishment by the people who had come with Peter. You see, they were all believers in Jesus who were also Jews, God's chosen people. Most likely, they had shared the good news about Jesus with other Jews. It's kind of hard for us to imagine how shocked they were to see these "non-chosen" Gentiles receive the gifts of the Spirit like this, and BEFORE they were baptized!
- And that's the final shocker. Here are folks who hadn't been baptized and look, they've got the Spirit. But that's not the way it's supposed to work! They knew there's a proper order to these things, right? You hear the Word, you confess your sin to God, you come to believe in Jesus, you get baptized, and THEN, you receive the Holy Spirit. Only, that's not how it has to be, and today's lesson is proof of that. God works as God wills, not as we do. The Holy Spirit is a free agent and sometimes does things out of our idea of order. Here, the Spirit fell upon the Gentiles giving them spiritual gifts and blowing the minds of those Jewish-Christian believers in the process.

All of this came about as a result of Peter's preaching, from a sermon.

What was Peter saying that caused all this ruckus and praise to God? For that, we peel another layer off the onion and go back a few verses where Peter started his speech; here's how he began:

I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him... (Acts 9:34).

Peter went on to tell them all about Jesus, about how God sent him to tell of God's love for Israel; about how Jesus was baptized by John and anointed by the Holy Spirit; about how he traveled and taught and healed and set free those oppressed by the devil; and, about how Jesus died on the cross but God raised him to new life on the third day; and, how Jesus appeared to his disciples, telling them to preach forgiveness of sins by believing in the name of Jesus.

What Peter spoke that day was the Gospel truth about God's love for human beings. True, it was spoken first to the children of Israel. But this truth was not their personal property, not theirs (or anyone's) to control. God's Spirit was on the move. Anyone, everyone, who believes the good news about Jesus Christ is forgiven and receives new life.

Here was something new, something hard for many to accept. Peter came to accept it, though: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him..." How did Peter come to this conclusion?

Time to peel back another layer... A few days before, Peter was praying on the roof of a house he was staying at in the town of Joppa, on the Mediterranean Sea. It got to be around lunch time so he asked to have a meal prepared. While he waited, Peter had a vision from God:

- A large sheet came down from heaven and in it were different kinds of animals, birds, and reptiles.
- Peter heard a voice say to him: "Get up, Peter; kill and eat."
- Peter refused because these animals were unclean by the standards of the Jewish Law.
- The same thing happened three times and after the third time, the sheet was pulled back up into heaven.

As Peter puzzled over the meaning of the vision, there was a knock on the door. Some servants from a Roman Centurion named Cornelius were there, asking Peter to come with them to the home of Cornelius in Caesarea, the next town up the coast.

- This man, Cornelius, had his own vision.
- An angel of God told Cornelius to invite Peter to come to his house and speak about God.
- So Cornelius dispatched the servants, who sought out Peter, who brought him to Cornelius.

And when Peter reached the house of the Centurion, it all came together for him.

What was God trying to show Peter by telling him to eat the animals Jews considered unclean? Here's Peter, speaking to the people gathered at the home of Cornelius:

“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. So when I was sent for, I came without objection” (Acts 9:28-29).

Peter was a lawbreaker: It's all right there in the Bible. He broke the law of separation between Jews and Gentiles. There's no doubting his guilt—he admitted it right here. But he's got an alibi—God told him to do it.

- Go with the men...
- Go, into the house of a Gentile, a Roman officer no less...
- Go and speak and tell them all about Jesus.

And in doing so, God showed Peter there are no barriers between peoples in God's eyes. All are worthy of God's love. Everyone and every...one. It doesn't matter if you are Jew or Gentile, or what skin color you have, or whether you are male or female, rich or poor; whatever category you can name or wall you want to build, God says: “Break it down. That's not my wall. You put up those walls between people. Break. It. Down! My love is for all.”

We've peeled back the layers of the onion and what do we find? We find the heart of the gospel message: God's love is for everyone. God's Son came to save every person under heaven, everyone who turns to Jesus in faith. This is what led Peter from a rooftop in Joppa to a living room of a Caesarean Gentile to speak about Jesus to see the Holy Spirit poured out on Gentiles and ultimately to ask:

“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

I think one of the main lessons for us here is that God upends our expectations. Just when we think we have God all figured out, God does something like this to show us we really don't know anything after all. God continues to surprise us, to startle us, to challenge us to see the world as God sees it; God sees the world as beloved.

In this story, the Holy Spirit upends our expectations. Peter thought he had the Spirit all figured out...we think we do sometimes too. But the Holy Spirit pours out love as God sees fit; and God sees fit to offer salvation to all. And if you don't think God can surprise us today, here's a story that illustrates how startling the Holy Spirit still can be:

A few years ago, a pastor described an ecumenical service she co-led with a Roman Catholic priest. They agreed that when it came time for Communion, the priest would offer bread on the left side and the Reformed minister on the right side; that way, folks would know which side they needed to go to. But when it came time for the Sacrament, people were so delighted to be worshiping together that they forgot—or disregarded—the instructions. Some Protestants went to the left and some Roman Catholics to the right. The priest and the minister saw the disruption of good order, but they did not intervene (even at the risk of authorities finding out). They simply made sure that all the people were fed. It was as

though they heard Peter saying, “Can anyone withhold the bread from these people who also share faith in Jesus Christ?”<sup>2</sup>

God’s love is for all the people. God clears away the obstacles that keep people from God’s love. God will act in ways that upend our expectations. You can count on it.

Let us remember this as we meet people in our lives, see people in the world around us, who we may not think are worthy or deserving of inclusion in God’s love. Pray God helps us to see everyone as beloved by God. Let us be a people who say along with Peter: “Who can withhold?” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara K. Lundblad, “Acts 10:44-48, Homiletical Perspective,” in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors, *Feasting on the Word, Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2, Lent Through Eastertide*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 481, 483.