

Acts 10:44–48

Ps. 98

1 John 5:1–6

John 15:9–17

Open Waters, Moving Spirit

Goal for the Session *Adults will explore the Spirit's movement and freedom to take the good news to others in surprising ways.*

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Acts 10:44–48

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” A. Katherine Grieb

As our passage begins, Peter has just given testimony concerning Jesus’ healing ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection. Peter summarizes: “To this all the prophets bear witness, that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (v. 43). The word “everyone” apparently functions as a dramatic cue for the Holy Spirit to fall upon Cornelius and upon his companions, fulfilling the prophecies Peter has just mentioned and demonstrating beyond a doubt that these Gentile believers in Jesus have also received forgiveness of sins in his name.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Noel Leo Erskine

The intervention of the Spirit in Peter’s meditation indicates that God in the Spirit often goes before to plead the case of those on the margins, those who are excluded. In Peter’s case the Spirit interrupts his meditation and orders him to engage strangers at his door. Peter is presented with another opportunity to learn something new concerning the divine persistence on behalf of persons in need. It is interesting that an apostle as devout as Peter has something fresh to learn about the divine character.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Jeffrey D. Peterson-Davis

While Peter and Cornelius have central roles in this narrative, it is not a story about them. Rather, it is a story about the Holy Spirit and how the Spirit’s purposes are accomplished in spite of the boundaries constructed by humans. The witness of the text is that neither Peter nor Cornelius was able to cross the boundaries on their own. But the outpouring of the Holy Spirit empowered each of them to move from their segregated places. The Holy Spirit broke the barriers and propelled the witness of the resurrection beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem and Galilee.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Barbara K. Lundblad

The Holy Spirit can be disruptive. Church historian Rosemary Radford Ruether says that the church must be organized to do two things: to pass on the tradition from one generation to another and to be open to the winds of the Holy Spirit by which the tradition comes alive in each generation. Sometimes the Holy Spirit has a hard time getting through our stubborn desire to stay the way we are. Where is the Holy Spirit trying to break through traditions that have become rock hard? How do we continue to pass on the traditions from one generation to another while also being open to the Spirit that brings the tradition alive?

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Acts 10:44–48

Focus on Your Teaching

We all like routines. It is easy to become creatures of habit—even (especially?) in the church. Worship fits this regular pattern. Service conforms to these well-established norms. But what happens when patterns and norms get broken by God’s Spirit? Do we dig in our heels, or set loose our sails? What challenges, and opportunities, posed by such boundary-breaking movement, face the adults in your group—and you? That will provide a key intersection for you to explore in tandem with today’s passage.

Spirit, you still unleash movement and change for the sake of new and renewed community. Open me to your ways of such renewal. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles
- two sheets of newsprint and markers
- white fabric
- tall white candle and lighter or battery-powered candle
- board or newsprint
- copies of Resource Sheets 1 and 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for May 13, 2018 unless you will be e-mailing it to participants

For Responding

- option 3: paper and pens

Today’s focus scripture relies heavily on the preceding verses of Acts 10. Even if you choose not to do the suggested background exercise, please set the context for what happens in Acts 10:44–48.

■ LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, post two sheets of newsprint. Title one sheet “Traditions help us to. . . .” Title the other sheet “Traditions prevent us from. . . .” Place markers nearby. Arrange the white cloth in the middle of your meeting space and place the candle on it.

As adults arrive, invite them to consider the headings on the newsprint sheets and to write their responses on them. When most have arrived, gather around the candle and light it. Briefly discuss the responses on the newsprint and then invite participants to identify one tradition in your congregation, without naming it aloud. Have them reflect silently on these questions, pausing after each question:

- ✧ What might happen if someone called that tradition into question or suggested change?
- ✧ What if *God* were the one calling that tradition into question or suggesting change?

Note that today’s session will explore a narrative that dramatically changed the composition of the early church. Offer these or similar words for prayer:

Open us, O God, to the words of Acts, to the leading of Spirit, and to our call to follow you. Amen.

EXPLORING

Ask participants to call out what they know of Peter and Cornelius. Afterward, have the group form four small groups and give each small group one of the following verse sets in Acts 10: verses 1–16; verses 17–23a; verses 23b–33; verses 34–43. Tell the groups to read their assigned verses and prepare to summarize what they learn about Peter and/or Cornelius. After a few moments, gather the whole group and ask for each small group to offer its summary in verse order.

Explain that today's passage unfolds in an "interruption" of Peter's sermon by the Holy Spirit. Explain that the passage will be read with "interruptions" after each verse that take the form of comments from group members and questions to discuss before moving on to the next verse.

Read verse 44 and invite group questions and comments.

- ✧ What effect is suggested by having the Spirit *fall* while Peter still speaks?
- ✧ Is merely *hearing* the word sufficient for the Spirit's gift?

Read verse 45 and invite group questions and comments.

- ✧ Do you think the astonishment is more surprise, or disbelief? Why?

Read verse 46 and invite group questions and comments.

- ✧ Why might the detail of *speaking in tongues* be important to record?

Read verse 47 and invite group questions and comments.

- ✧ In what ways does this verse connect with Acts 8:36 and John 10:16, two Scriptures studied in recent sessions?

Read verse 48 and invite group questions and comments.

- ✧ Who do you take to be the "them" being ordered by Peter; why?
- ✧ What is the significance of the invitation to stay on (see also Acts 16:14–15)?

Call attention to the "So What?" excerpt on Resource Sheet 1: "While Peter and Cornelius have central roles in this narrative, it is not a story about them. Rather, it is a story about the Holy Spirit. . . ." List on newsprint or board specific actions attributed to God's Spirit in today's passage. Invite participants to identify connections they see between this passage and the work of the Spirit they have studied in previous sessions.

The Gospels and Acts are filled with stories of Jesus and the Holy Spirit breaking through traditions and accepted rules in order to bring good news and healing to people considered outsiders. Form groups of two or three and invite them to use their Bibles to quickly list as many stories as they can about Jesus or the Holy Spirit acting in such a way.

After a few minutes ask each group to name one story. Go around the class as many times as it takes to hear all the stories that are recalled. Then ask:

- ✧ How has the Spirit acted in our church or community to include people who were previously not included?
- ✧ How does the entire community change as a result?

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

1. **Spirit's Movement** The Spirit continued to bring change throughout the history of the church. Ask:

Some may take offense at specific items in the “-isms” listed in the first paragraph of the excerpt on Resource Sheet 2. If you choose option 2, be prepared to respect (and call others to respect) the differences that may surface.

✧ Where in our congregation’s history, or in your experiences, has God’s Spirit moved and brought change?

Be prepared to tell one such story of your own to get the conversation started. As stories are told, identify ways in which those experiences might be helpful in facing issues of change and renewal today. Name practices (prayer, models of discernment, active listening) that can help us discern where the movement of God’s Spirit is. Ask each adult to choose one of these practices to engage in this week.

- 2. Moved by Spirit Today** Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (What Does It Mean to Be Moved by Spirit Today?). Allow time for participants to read and reflect on the excerpt on the sheet. Begin the discussion by affirming that not all issues are valued equally by us, and that some may be especially “hot button” issues. Allow participants to offer responses to the excerpt and its implications. Ask:

✧ What do you find most threatening and most liberating in these words?

Invite participants to silently consider how they might be moved by the Spirit on a particular issue or tradition in your church. Challenge them to pray to be open to the Spirit on this issue in the upcoming weeks. Lead a short prayer for openness and guidance.

- 3. Renewing Traditions** Recall the moment in Gathering when group members considered one particular tradition in your church. Provide paper and pens for them for this journaling exercise. Encourage individuals to reflect more deeply on the traditions they recalled. Ask:

✧ What is the purpose of this tradition?

✧ Imagine you are looking at that tradition from God’s point of view. What value does it have? Where might it need Spirit’s change and movement?

Invite participants to prayerfully consider and commit to one action seeking Spirit’s renewal of that tradition and their participation in it.

CLOSING

Gather around the candle and light it, if necessary. Invite the participants to relate thoughts, challenges, or questions generated by this session and by today’s passage.

Read aloud Psalm 98:1, the psalm designated for this Sunday in the lectionary: “O sing to the LORD a new song.” Have participants call out ways in which Peter and Cornelius opened to God’s new song, and the Spirit’s new leading, in the inclusion of the Gentiles. Close with a sentence prayer that you begin, inviting those comfortable doing so to add a sentence prayer related to the ways adults will seek to be open to the movement of God’s Spirit in the coming week.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for May 13, 2018, unless it will be e-mailed during the week.

Focus on Acts 10:44–48

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— From “Exegetical Perspective,” A. Katherine Grieb

As our passage begins, Peter has just given testimony concerning Jesus’ healing ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection. Peter summarizes: “To this all the prophets bear witness, that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (v. 43). The word “everyone” apparently functions as a dramatic cue for the Holy Spirit to fall upon Cornelius and upon his companions, fulfilling the prophecies Peter has just mentioned and demonstrating beyond a doubt that these Gentile believers in Jesus have also received forgiveness of sins in his name.

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Jeffrey D. Peterson-Davis

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May 6, 2018
Open Waters,
Moving Spirit

Adult
Resource Sheet 2

What Does It Mean to Be Moved by Spirit Today?

[Acts 10:44–48] is an important text for the church today. Not only do the wounds of exclusion run deep in our culture and in the church; the realities of uncrossed boundaries still exist. Neither society nor the church has overcome racism, classism, ageism, nationalism, heterosexism, and other prejudices. We continue to propagate segregation in many forms as we hold firm to the visible and invisible boundaries between “us” and “them.”

Reflecting on the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles, can we imagine what the Spirit might do with relations between people of different races? Is it possible to imagine the Christian community embracing the full participation and leadership of women and men, young and old, poor and wealthy, straight and gay, capitalist and socialist, and so on? Can we imagine any boundaries so rigid as to be impassable by the Holy Spirit? . . .

Peter and Cornelius were given visions to see the world differently. Who among us today are seeing visions of the expanding scope of God’s grace? Are there voices, perhaps from the margins, that have been empowered by the Holy Spirit in ways that challenge the boundaries of prejudice and exclusion? Will the church be the astonished “circumcised” ones who are astounded at what the Holy Spirit might do?

We should be careful preaching these stories in the church. Those who are hearing the voice of God, the young who have visions and the old who dream dreams (Acts 2:17, Joel 2:28), might just be empowered to speak truth, share their visions, tell of their dreams. Or perhaps if we do preach these words, we should be prepared to be led to the threshold to cross a boundary.

—Excerpted from Jeffrey D. Peterson-Davis, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 482.

