

LOVE REACHES FOR THE UNCLEAN
SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

ACTS 10:34-48
MAY 10, 2015

³⁴ Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), ³⁷ you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

⁴⁴ While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. ⁴⁵ And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, ⁴⁷ “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” ⁴⁸ And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

Second reading and Gospel for today speak about what love is.

Text is about what love does.

When you picture a mother's love, you may think of
some sweet things, like hugs and kisses,
but I think also of some pretty dirty and disgusting things,
mothers are led to do out of love,
like rinsing out diapers. It may not be common any more
but older mothers remember swishing dirty diaper in toilet
then wringing it out by hand & later washing it.
when child is little older, is replaced by wiping dirty bottoms.
and at least somewhere along the line cleaning up vomit,
maybe even reaching down into sink full of it to unplug it.
I know about this because it is not just mothers who do it
but fathers too.

I mention it because this is also the kind of thing that love leads

Jesus to do for us and Jesus leads us to do for others.

JESUS IMMERSSES HIMSELF IN OUR SICK WORLD
GOD REACHES THROUGH US TO THE UNCLEAN
THE SPIRIT REACHES INTO US TO WASH US CLEAN

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This is Peter's sermon in home of Cornelius, Roman Centurion

He starts by reviewing things he surely heard about Jesus while on duty in that region,

But he traces it back to Jesus' baptism by John.

John called people, including Roman soldiers, to be baptized in muddy Jordan river to wash away sins. but Jesus, who had no sins, was also baptized, not to wash away his sins, but to wash our sins onto him, as part of his immersing himself in the filth of our sins.

He went on from there to express God's love for the unlovely by walking the dirty roads & streets to seek out the unclean, having dinner with tax collectors & other sinners, drinking water from cup of Samaritan adulteress, touching bleeding women, lepers and dead bodies. in order to heal people and wrestle them out of the grip of the most unclean of unclean spirits: devil.

Without holding his nose, he reached out to embrace all of the sickness and decay of our sin filled world to show the great love of God for his ruined creation until he finally took all the disease of our sin into his bare hands when they were nailed to the cross and he died the most disgusting of all deaths.

He did all this for us because, like helpless infants and those disabled by sickness, we are unable to do anything to deal with our own sins and without him would simply wallow in them forever.

But he reached down into the slime of our sinfulness
not to stay there but to rise again, holy and pure,
still holding on to us, to lift us also up to be with God,
washed clean by his blood.

Now because of his great love for us that includes
everyone in the world...

GOD REACHES THROUGH US TO THE UNCLEAN

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⁴² And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead.

It took some doing to bring Peter to the understanding
of what he is now explaining to Cornelius.

It took many generations for God to train the Jews
to avoid becoming infected & polluted by idolatry & unbelief
by being quarantined from those with false gods.

God gave many practices to remind them they were special
like rules about what food was considered unclean.

Just before this, Peter had to figure out that a vision
in which he was called to eat non kosher food
was really telling him not to reject people as unclean.

But even before this, Peter had to overcome his
holier-than-thou attitude even toward the other disciples
which made him think he would stay more loyal to Jesus.
He had to face his own need for undeserved grace
when he was ashamed of totally failing to speak of Jesus
and was restored again after the resurrection.

He had to overcome avoidance of what seemed like dirty jobs
by the realization all God’s children are stinky, including him.

Now he wasn’t going to miss an opportunity again
to talk about Jesus, even in front of those who hated him.

It wasn’t just Peter. For early church, it was hard for long time
to overcome gag reflex at accepting those not like them.

It is still hard to this day because of our human nature
to understand how true it is that God shows no partiality
and how the truth that Jesus is and wants to be Lord of all
is good news that brings peace to us and among us.

Even when we forget what it means to be Jew and Gentile
new lines keep appearing that hold us back
from sharing the good news of Jesus.

Recently we have been reminded of surprisingly persistent
assumptions, attitudes & interpretations
about being black or white, or about immigrants
Political campaigns are ready again to point out
to class war between poor or middle class and the 1%
Every generation has new symbols that set apart
those with nose rings, tongue studs and tattoos
from those with neckties and perms,
each looking at other thinking: ick,
how can you stand that, it's not natural.

But we have to find our way past these obstacles
because, as Peter realized, God has commanded us
to preach to all the people and testify that
Jesus will come again as judge of living and dead
and God shows no partiality toward anyone of any nation
except that those who fear him and do what is right
are acceptable to him.

So what is this, "fearing him and doing what is right"?
It has nothing to do with legalistic rules of Judaism
or any other kind of things we must accomplish
but it is simply repenting of sins
and responding to the call of the gospel to trust in Jesus

as

THE SPIRIT REACHES INTO US TO WASH US CLEAN

⁴³ To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in
him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

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all who heard the word. ⁴⁵ And the believers from among the
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were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter
declared, ⁴⁷ "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people,
who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" ⁴⁸ And he
commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

If your washing machine is working as it should,
the dirty cloth diaper or the rag used to clean the bathroom
comes out just as clean as the white shirt worn to church.

God's washing machine works the way we need it to
when God throws us all in there together.
How God's washing machine works is illustrated in this text.
First, all the prophets of the O.T. point ahead to same thing
Peter points back to: Jesus' death & resurrection for us.
Everyone in all history and whole world who believe in him
receives forgiveness of sins because of him.
So, how does this believing in him happen? v. 44:
It happens when God's word is shared & people hear it.
God's living word does the work.
so God's living people need to share it.
But the one who causes the gospel to be believed is not us
but God the Holy Spirit who works on all who hear it.
The Spirit went to work even before Peter was done talking.
But Peter knows the plan Jesus gave
for making disciples of all nations
includes both teaching and Holy Baptism.
So, when he sees the Holy Spirit's stain stick already working
he says, let's get them in the water.
We all need the same thing, no matter how clean or dirty
we may appear to be on the outside.
We need the Holy Spirit to reach into us
on the inside, where the real stinky stuff is,
our selfishness and pride
and turn us inside out so we can be clean
and so that we in turn reach out to others.
This happens when we live each day in our baptism,
getting rid of our filthy rags with contrition & repentance
and putting on the righteousness of Christ.
This happens when we continue to hear the word
of the prophets and apostles about faith in Jesus.
And this happens when the Holy Spirit continues to work in us
through the sacrament of Holy Communion,
working into the stubborn stains of the fabric of our being
the blood of Jesus which cleanses our hearts & minds
of things that separate us from God and others.
As long as this is happening, we don't need to be afraid
to lovingly take hold of the most smelly and disgusting,
including both those different from us & our own children.
with confidence God will continue to wash us clean
because...

JESUS IMMERSSES HIMSELF IN OUR SICK WORLD

Love led him to do everything it took to clean up
the sickness of our sin by his death for us.

Now GOD REACHES THROUGH US TO THE UNCLEAN

as we learn from what his love has done for us
to reach out to the others with his love

THE SPIRIT REACHES INTO US TO WASH US CLEAN

The Holy Spirit himself does the work
when we use God's word and sacraments
even as the Spirit keeps working on us through them
to purify us to be his dear, holy and loving people.