Sermon for the 6th Sunday of Easter May 6, 2018 Breaking Barriers

Acts 10:44-48

Psalm 98

1 John 5:1-6

John 15:9-17

For most of my life, I have wanted to be sure about things. I wanted to have some rock-solid points of view that couldn’t be challenged and were always right! It’s easy to think that if you are a Christian, or even a religious person of any faith at all, that there would be a few things that you could be sure of. And indeed, there are…a few things! For example, I believe without a doubt that Jesus is the Son of God. I believe without a doubt that he died and rose from the dead…and walked around the earth and appeared to many people. Those are things that I am sure…absolutely sure about. Do I completely understand the nuances of everything that Jesus said and did? No, I don’t. Do I always know the mind and will of God? Not a chance! And if you don’t either, I would suggest that you are on pretty solid ground. I find that I’m pretty suspicious of anyone who claims to know the mind and will of God in all situations. To do so is to put God in a box small enough for a human being to understand fully…and I don’t think that God will fit into such a box.

So in our scripture lessons this morning we learn more twists and turns about the nature and will of God. We shouldn’t be at all surprised that God surprises us on a regular basis. Last Sunday, we heard the story about the Ethiopian eunuch that Philip taught and baptized. He’s outside the mainstream on several levels. He’s a eunuch for one thing, so his gender is indeterminate. In 21st century America, that would be a problem for some people. He’s an Ethiopian, so he is outside of the Israelite chosen community of the Jewish faith. He has two strikes against him. And yet, when Philip tells him about Jesus as he’s explaining the passage in Isaiah about the suffering servant, the Ethiopian eunuch is completely captivated. When they come upon some water, he asks to be baptized…and Philip baptizes him right there and then…no hesitation, no qualms. That act of baptism for the Ethiopian eunuch breaks a barrier that separates the chosen people of God from the rest of the world.

In today’s lesson from Acts, we learn a little more about the experiences of the apostles. We walk right into the middle of a story about Peter, but there are lots of unanswered questions. The passage says that the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word while Peter was still speaking. Well, what was Peter saying? And who were the people who were listening to him? Where were they? What were the circumstances under which Peter started to speak? What were the constraints at the time about who could be baptized? There’s a long list of unanswered questions here. And we can’t even get a glimpse of what this passage means for us until we get some of those questions answered.

Let’s take a look at some of the background of this story. It’s a tale of multiple examples of God breaking all kinds of barriers that the Jewish people have been taught are important if they love God. When new information about what God wants comes flooding out to the apostles from God, they are confused and all around them are confused.

Peter is staying in Joppa with a man named Simon who is a tanner. His profession, dealing with the skins of dead animals, makes him ritually unclean. No self-respecting, God-fearing Jewish man would do such a thing, but Peter did. Another barrier has been broken.

In Caesarea, a centurion in the Roman Army named Cornelius has a vision from God. He is a God-fearer which is the term given to someone who is not Jewish, not circumcised, but one who prays to God and follows much of Jewish religious ritual. Although a God-fearer, he is definitely a Gentile…someone outside the Jewish faith. He is visited by an angel of God who tells him to send some of his men to Joppa to get Peter and bring him back to Caesarea, so he does. By this, the angel says, all of Cornelius’ household will be saved. While he is waiting for Peter’s arrival, Cornelius gathers together all his relatives and his friends. Still another barrier is broken.

Just before the messengers arrive at Joppa and find Peter, Peter goes up on a rooftop to pray. It’s about noontime and Peter is very hungry. He falls into a trance and has a vision on a rooftop in which a sheet filled with unclean animals is spread out before him and God tells Peter to kill them and eat them. Peter protests that he has never eaten anything unclean and God himself contradicts him by saying that Peter must not call anything unclean that God has declared clean. That vision is still fresh in Peter’s mind went he sets off for Caesarea with Cornelius’ messengers. A barrier has been broken.

When Peter meets the crowd gathered at Cornelius’ house, this is the crowd of people the Peter begins speaking to…all of Cornelius’ household, his relatives and his friends. Peter tells them that God shows no partiality, but that in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God. That’s quite a radical statement from someone who is part of the chosen people of Israel. That statement alone breaks a barrier.

Peter goes on to tell them about Jesus Christ and all that he accomplished in preaching peace and healing people and reconciling them with God. Peter identifies Jesus as Lord of All and the anointed One of God. He told about Jesus’ death and his resurrection and the witnesses who were chosen by God to talk with Jesus and eat with Jesus after his resurrection. Peter tells them that the witnesses were commanded by God to preach to people and to testify that Jesus is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. Peter reminds them of all that the prophets testify about Jesus that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. There are no barriers! No one is disqualified by birth or geography or current religious beliefs. All are welcomed. There are no pre-conditions to be met. Barriers are breaking repeatedly.

This is what Peter was saying to the crowd gathered before him. And before he could finish speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. No exceptions! Men, women, children, slaves, free, Jewish, Gentile, and those without any pre-existing faith. The word from God…there are no barriers!!

It should give us all pause to think for a moment about all the barriers that we create…artificially…that separate people from the faith. Just think back a few years to the schism in the Episcopal Church itself. Differences in doctrine…in understanding the messages of scripture caused that barrier to be erected…a barrier between people who are basically part of the same church. The repercussions are still being felt.

Sometimes the barriers we build are all quite unconscious…not something that we do intentionally. But we are human beings and we pass judgment on others…often without knowing all the facts. We decide ahead of time what is acceptable to God and we use that as our benchmark. And if the truth be told, we are probably harder on ourselves than we are on others in terms of criticism and judgment. We don’t always know what God is doing in the world or in the life of another. What looks so terribly wrong to us, may be a mere stepping stone to something else for God. We don’t know the mind of God.

We do know that if we fear God…that if we are in conversation with God in listening as well as in speaking…that if we are trying our best to figure out the right thing to do in any situation and then trusting that God will light the way for us… we do know that God’s judgement of us will be loving and kind. We aren’t required to get it right all the time. God knows that we won’t. And we know that we won’t. We are required to try.

God’s message to us is to break down the barriers we find in ourselves and in others to make God known. That’s what God asks of us. And with God’s help, we can do exactly that.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.