

**A sermon preached by Rev. Jason Cashing at
Clarence Presbyterian Church on May 5, 2024.**

SPIRIT UNBOUND

<Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98:1-9; John 15:9-17>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Risen One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

On July 21, 1988, rangers and park officials of Yellowstone National Park begin actively suppressing any and all fires within the park due to unseasonably dry fire conditions. One day later, on July 22, the North Fork Fire broke out which would quickly grow dangerous and barely managed. Joined by other fires and weather conditions which sprung up over the following six weeks, the Yellowstone Fires of 1988 would eventually scorch over one-third of America's first National Park. At the time, it was one of the greatest and most impactful fires of the park's history, and it was considered to be a devastating event. Fourteen years later, as I arrived in the area and would begin hiking and exploring the park, the evidence of these fires was still noticeable to the casual glance. I listened with awe to the stories of how, despite all efforts, the fire would not be contained or controlled, jumping fire breaks and continuing to burn despite how much water and suppressant was dropped...how it moved across the landscape without regard to natural habitats or human structures, almost as a force with its own life. When the fire was finally contained and extinguished by rain and snow in mid-September, the next questions were "what will the impact of this be?" and "what will happen next?"

In many ways those questions are the same ones the disciples wrestled with, even as Jesus taught them ahead of his arrest. They are the questions they faced again as apostles in the early church, as they looked to the shifting and changing dynamics of how their ministry and mission was spreading into the world. And these were by no means minor questions and considerations: the very landscape of culture and religion, of spiritual understanding and engagement was changing around them, almost daily. Everything that was understood, everything that was visible before their eyes, was shifting. All the lines, delineations, and boundaries that were familiar and made everything make sense were shifting and being transcended.

And these questions are still ones which we face today, with many similar dynamics at work. It can all too readily feel as if the understood and established lines are moving and being redrawn, which is usually an uncomfortable feeling. And even as we face such questions, and all that comes with them, we can gain stability and understanding by looking to those who have navigated similar waters before us, namely Peter.

Peter's words from our reading of Acts this morning come in the concluding portion of a much bigger story. Not just bigger in terms of "more to it," but bigger, as well, in terms of impact upon the Church. It is an opportunity for faithful engagement and following. But even in faithful living, there is no hiding from the reality: engaging such questions - and being open to the answers they may yield - is a terribly uncomfortable and occasionally frightening process.

Humanity, in general, has long sought stability and comfort through classifying and organizing the world around us, knowing and establishing boundary lines for society. In fact, looking

around the facets of our daily living we can see easily such boundaries, such lines, posted nearly everywhere in our world. There are lines of where the sidewalk ends and the road begins, determining not only where it is safe but where is acceptable or even legal to drive or walk or bike. There are understood and visible boundary lines at intersections. Signs that designate hours of parking, to name just a few obvious examples. The presence of these signs, of these lines and boundaries is evident everywhere and helps frame our understandings of society and behavior in community with one another. But this practice also gets applied to individuals, each of whom is created in the Divine Image, determining who is in or out, who is acceptable or not. Just as this is the case today, so too was it the case for Peter and the others in our reading from Acts.

And in this case, it is not just a matter of Peter coming in contact with these boundaries. In context, Peter has made the decision to baptize Cornelius and his household. In much the same ways as our reading last week of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, Cornelius is a Roman military officer. He and his household are Gentiles, and representative of the occupying forces and foreign government. In terms of boundary lines, they would be on the other side of what was typically understood as "acceptable." In fact, Peter thinks so, himself, and never would have given Cornelius the time of day, were it not for God's work in the matter.

I told you that this story is bigger than we might imagine.

Just before meeting with Cornelius and his household, Peter had a vision. He knows he is hungry, and in response to his hunger he sees God lowering a sheet containing animals of every kind which are, in Jewish understanding, considered to be unclean. He is told to eat, and he refuses. "Nothing unclean has ever touched my lips." Peter sticks to upholding the understood and established lines. Again he is told to eat and again he refuses, stating that what is being offered is unclean and he is devout. Finally, God loses patience and exclaims, "you should not proclaim to be unclean the things that I, God, have determined to be clean. Now eat!" And the vision ends.

In a roundabout way, this vision is showing Peter, not necessarily a brand new thing, but rather a refreshed understanding. Through this vision, Peter - and we, as well - are being reminded that God has a habitual practice of transcending human lines and created boundaries to achieve God's vision. Countless stories are found within our scriptures of instances where God did what was not expected, chose and anointed those who were not the first, or even acceptable, choice, and acted in ways that surprised...everyone. The Spirit of God is not to be contained, predicted, or controlled. Much like the 1988 Yellowstone fires. And from this renewed understanding, Peter realizes that there is nothing to keep Cornelius and his household from being baptized.

It's the same word in Greek that was used by the Ethiopian eunuch, "withhold." There is, now, in the Spirit of God, nothing to withhold the waters of baptism, the waters of life and belonging, from those whom God has deemed fit, those whom have determined to follow God and who strive to be a friend to Jesus.

Herein, also, lies evidence of former established boundaries being transcended. Jesus, speaking to the disciples in the continuation of the discourse we began last week, proclaims that the disciples are no longer servants. Servants had a specific task and expectation. It was

a rigid role that meant “yes” to these activities and expectations, and “no” to anything else. A servant knew their place, and a good servant stayed in their place.

The lines we draw are often erased by God and the wild, unpredictable movement of the Spirit.

For Jesus then proclaims that they are no longer servants, but friends; and friends transcend boundary lines and roles. Their connection and communion is greater. Which brings us, surprisingly, back to the Table, the very same theological table that Jesus prepared with his disciples, with his friends, on the night he was betrayed and arrested.

It is this table that we come to again today in worship, but there is something very important for us to consider: Communion is not the singular act of coming to this table once a month, or even once a week. Communion, I believe, is more than the act of what we do on this occasion. Rather, communion is who we are as we dwell together in faith and work together to proclaim the good news of the gospel. Communion is who we are as we seek to look for and follow the Spirit at work in the world. We come to the Table to be reminded, and to be nourished in faith, but we are the communion.

The line of how we understand ourselves is transcended by the Spirit, and we are transcended in this understanding. We, the people of faith, are the communion of God in and for the world. It is not a singular act but an ongoing reality that we live out, each and every day, in each and every place. We are the communion. And the Spirit leads us - in all times and places - to proclaim and establish new and abundant life, resurrection life.

In the years that followed 1988, with forests in Yellowstone burnt and decimated, ecologists, rangers, and visitors alike noticed something unexpected: New life was growing. The fire that had ravaged and scorched uncontained across all boundary lines had another reality, as well: it enabled the pine cones of the lodgepole pine tree to germinate and release new buds. In fact, these pine cones can *only* germinate under the kind of intense heat created by such wildfires. The very unpredictable and uncontrollable event that brought about uncertainty and devastation also enabled new life. The forest was renewed.

In the Spirit of God, we, too, are renewed. The Spirit can and will cross and transcend our boundary lines, often in uncomfortable ways, but it will also bring us to new life, expanded life, and a greater communion of the faithful. We may very well be asking ourselves, “what will the impact of this be?” and “what will happen next?”. We would not be the first.

Will Willimon’s conclusion on the text of our reading from Acts is, “Faith, when it comes down to it, is often our breathless attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God, to keep asking ourselves, ‘What is God doing, where on earth is God going now?’”

And our response, rather than focusing primarily or solely on determining an answer, instead is to follow the Spirit of God as faithfully as we may, and to proclaim new life - within ourselves, within this communion of God, within the world and all who dwell therein. So let us again come to the Table of our Lord. Let us again follow the one who calls us friend and not servant. Let us look to and follow the Spirit of God. And let us be the full communion of the faithful. Amen.