

SERMON: "Do We Hinder or Embrace God's Call?" – 5th Sunday of Easter  
Text: Acts 11:1-18

"Freedom", a favorite word for us who live in the United States of America. For "freedom" is the number one value which founded this nation. The first Europeans who came to this land were searching for freedom of religious expression, and wanting a new way of government that would protect human rights. Freedom is a dream for many around our world. Those in Afghanistan and the Sudan yearn to live in freedom, instead of terror. For those who live in Mexico want to live in freedom and out of the grasp of violence due to drug lords. Those who live in China fear the regime backlash if they say or do something against the government. Yes, freedom seems like a far off dream for many people around the world.

But let us not fool ourselves. Freedom is difficult. It can cause great anxiety. Freedom means all have a right, even those we may deeply disagree with. Freedom means that not everyone will act in the same way, speak of the same opinion, or believe in the same thing. Freedom means each of us have the right to express our views and still live in the same country, and in the same households.

In today's scripture passage we see a community struggling with the freedom by which the Holy Spirit chooses to touch people's lives. The story in Acts, about the conversion of Cornelius and Peter, is pivotal in the opening and spread of the Christian faith to the rest of the world. I would like us to explore our

Acts text today to discover the wonderful freedom of God's Holy Spirit, and evaluate if we hinder or embrace the freedom of the Spirit's movement.

In Acts freedom of God's Spirit has caused anxiety among the Jewish Christians. They have heard that Peter has broken table fellowship laws. He went into an unclean house and ate with an unclean gentile. How could he do this knowing he would be breaking the laws of the faith? Peter, being clever, brings with him six witnesses to what happened. He knew being part of the Jewish Christian faith community was on the line. To this point the Christian faith had remained a Jewish sect. The faithful group of believers maintained their Jewish faith and rituals alongside with their belief of Jesus Christ who was also a Jew. It was beyond their comprehension that Christianity would ever expand beyond their Jewish faith. But now they are faced with this reality. The Holy Spirit had now included an uncircumcised gentile, and if that wasn't shocking enough, he was a military commander of the despised Roman army. How could this be?

Peter confesses that he too was hesitant and resisted going to Cornelius. But in a vision he was told to go to Cornelius' household and eat with him. The message from God was "for anything that God created was clean, you must not call profane." So Peter reluctantly goes. What he finds is quite amazing. He found a repentant man. Cornelius tells Peter of his encounter with an angel that tells him that God had heard his prayers and that he had received gifts of faith, and alms. Peter tells the council of Jewish Christians of his new learning. "God shows no partiality but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is

right is acceptable to him.” (10:34.) Peter then teaches Cornelius’ household about Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit fell on all of them as it fell on the disciples at Pentecost. Peter concludes that he went to the gentile household because he was not called to hinder God.

God’s Holy Spirit will fall on those God chooses. The Spirit will blow where and to whom it chooses. The common denominator is not social status, gender, nationality, sexuality, race, culture, religious practices, expression of worship, it is the repentance before the Lord our God. It is this reason, faith in Jesus Christ, that both Jewish and Gentile Christians are part of the faithful in Jerusalem. It is this reason that a Roman Centurion can be called Christian, and be part of the Body of Christ. It is for this reason a child of God, Elijah, is baptized and welcomed into the body of Christ not knowing anything about what is happening to him. God’s grace is open to all whom God chooses. Acceptance in the Body of Christ doesn’t depend on following the table fellowship laws, or being circumcised, or views on sexuality. It totally depends on God’s free choice.

This sounds great and it is good news but it can bring with it great anxiety, for God’s free spirit calls people into the church not us. We are to be open and loving including them as our brothers and sisters in faith. This is what theologian, Miroslav Volf calls “theology of embrace”. This theology was effectively used to mediate ethnic and religious conflicts in the Balkans. The act of embracing entails two movements – a movement that creates “space in myself for the other and an “enclosing movement to communicate that I do not want to be without the other in her or his otherness.” Volf suggests that we are to embrace others

because we are created to reflect the fellowship that exists in the triune God. The Triune God is made up of three persons each unique yet interrelated and needing the other to be complete. Embracing others means people who are very different from us will be invited to come by God's spirit to join us in ministry. It will mean that human barriers such color of skin, culture, financial and social status, language, age, traditions, physical capabilities, does not matter, only that we are chosen by God to be in God's faith family.

My friends have you felt the new spirit among us? If so please say Amen! Well I say it is because we are embracing God's call of engaging in different ministries and with people who are different from us. I have seen us embrace and not resist or hinder the Spirit's call. Let me give you some illustrations:

We have welcomed Ukrainian and Hispanic churches to worship within this building. We have worshiped with Bajo La Uncion with a bi lingual worship as well as a combination of Pentecostal and more reserved worship.

We have spent a day with Pastor Jimmie James and Pastor Banks from two African American churches to learn about how the poor live and survive in society. We have worship with those from the Greater Things Ministries Church and blessed by the preaching of Pastor Jimmie James, the singing of his wife, Alice, and the liturgical dancing of one of their members.

We are trying to reach out and meet the people whom God may be calling to join us from our community through Cornucopia Days, and our Ice cream Social, and just yesterday we gave our neighbors flowers in celebration of May Day along with an invitation to our Invite a Friend Sunday.

I have seen people from Kenya, Vietnam, Native American, Somalia, Indonesia sincerely welcomed to worship and be part of the Body of Christ. I have seen the Adult Class welcome and listened to guests from the Sheik Community, from the Islam faith, and Christians from Iraq, El Salvador and Guatemala as they shared their faith stories.

I have seen the poor and homeless, wealthy, educated and less educated, sincerely greeted at the door by our deacons as they come to worship with us on Sunday mornings. And I see these people greeted by all of you as you pass the peace to them.

I have seen you care and welcome those who have been in trouble with the law. I have seen you welcome and embrace those struggling with mental illness. My friends I'd say the new spirit among us is the Holy Spirit. As we are open to the free movement of the Spirit by welcoming all of God's people that God calls we are embracing God's call for us.

God is not going to be restricted by our likes, dislikes, and preferences. If we hinder God's call with these thoughts and actions then Christ church will not thrive. God's freedom of choice is what really counts, and what the church continues to thrive on.