



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Easter 6, Year B
May 6, 2018

[RCL]: Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

Acts 10:44-48

This passage records the momentous occasion of the Pentecost of the Gentiles, a major event in salvation history unveiling the total breadth of God's saving intentions toward the whole human race. We witness here more than a mere giving of power from on high to a group of foreigners, but a breathtaking initiative—or should I say, breath-giving initiative?—of God choosing these Gentiles to be part of his covenant people. In this event, God literally takes them to be the place where His Spirit abides, His temple that He sanctifies for Himself, bringing to mind the event of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River where the Holy Spirit rested upon Jesus and the voice of the Father declared His divine approval: "This is my Son, the Beloved" (Matthew 3:17).

Only in hindsight could the apostles see that this was God's plan all along, as attested throughout Holy Scripture and especially among the prophets. So is the prophecy of Simeon fulfilled at the beginning of Luke's Gospel as Jesus becomes "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:32). With God's assurance of approval, Peter rightly sees that God desires them to receive what comes to be known to the Church Fathers as the sacrament of enlightenment, or Holy Baptism, that they might come to participate in the death and resurrected life of Jesus Christ.

- The circumcised believers who accompanied Peter were said to be "astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles" (v. 45). Is there any person or group of people to whom we wish the Lord were not quite so generous?
- The excitement of Holy Spirit's dynamic activity in the early Church simply saturates the Book of Acts and the whole New Testament. Does our own church or fellowship invite the Holy Spirit to manifest manifold gifts in us and move us to extol God?

Psalm 98

This psalm of praise beautifully captures the response of the Church to God's victory of radical faithfulness to His people Israel (v.4) that radiates outward not only to the nations (v.3) but to the whole creation.

The psalm teaches us that the proper response to God taking the initiative for our salvation is to break out in rejoicing and song. Indeed, if we did not, the very rocks would cry out!

We as Christians need to be reminded that God’s redemption through the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ is *cosmic* in scope, as the 8th chapter of Romans reminds us. It’s not limited to Israel. It’s not even limited to human beings. It’s for the whole created order together! By the victorious sacrifice of Jesus, God has purchased reconciliation between Himself and us, and even between humankind and the environment—so that just as Adam and Eve enjoyed a free, just, and peaceful relationship with God and all the creatures in the Garden of Eden before the Fall, so might we—as a foretaste now and in full in the age to come.

This is the new song of the redeemed to our Creator, bringing our creativity to bear and calling forth the whole creation to join in a song of praise to our God who has done marvelous things!

- How might we add our creative gifts to the praise of our Creator God?
- In what ways can we help extend God’s redemptive and reconciling purposes (His righteousness, v.10) for the world as well as “the peoples” in our own lives and localities?

1 John 5:1-6

In this passage, we see John weaving together faith, love, and obedience to God’s commandments in an inseparable bond.

John insists that Jesus’ commandments *aren’t* burdensome, unlike the teachings of the Jewish lawyers and Pharisees that Jesus critiqued. They’re not burdensome, even though we are challenged to an even deeper level of obedience that the Pharisees demanded of their disciples! This is possible because of our new and direct connection to the life of God that transforms us and cleanses us by water and blood from all inner inclination to sin and allows us to overcome the world and its twisted desires (cf. 1 John 2:15-17). I invite you to read and reflect upon Ezekiel 36:23-27: “The nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.”

- How might Ezekiel’s prophecy help us to understand that Jesus’ commandments might not be burdensome?
- Have you experienced times when keeping Jesus’s commandments was not burdensome, but a joy? Why was this?
- In what ways can our victory in Jesus Christ be hijacked by “the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches” (1 John 2:16)?

John 15:9-17

In this passage, Jesus is calling us into a deeper relationship with Him—really deep! His desire is that we should live always in that heavenly love and complete joy which characterizes the relationship between Jesus and His Father, and so, therefore, He gives us His commandments. If we want to have joy like Jesus’, we have to learn to love one another just as Jesus has loved us—in humility and self-sacrifice.

Jesus is challenging us to leave behind a mere servile approach of extrinsic motivations for obedience to His commands (such as fear of punishment or even hope of reward) and to enter into a relationship of *friendship* with Him, where our motivations become internalized and we take ownership of our path as a way of love.

The amazing thing about this passage is that God is not interested in having slaves—He wants friends! Suppose your parents forced you to take music lessons as a child. When you first began, the practicing probably felt like a burden, but at some point, perhaps you began to take delight in the new freedom that this new skill brought you through your hours of practice, and you find yourself suddenly desiring to pour yourself out into it with ever-increasing depths of creativity and passion. So it is with our relationship with Christ. We need to make the step at some point in our journeys where we take full ownership of our discipleship to Jesus, but the more we sacrifice of our own will to His lordship and bear fruit by abiding in Him, the more our capacity for joy increases, and the more we become true friends of God.

- Which of His commandments is Jesus inviting you to learn to obey for the sake of your joy?
- What conditions does Jesus give for receiving whatever we ask of the Father in prayer?
- Jesus is also calling us to friendship with one another modeled after His own friendship with us. How might we foster true bonds of friendship within the Church?

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