

“Reverberations of Pentecost”
Acts 10:1-11:18
May 31, 2020 – Pentecost Sunday
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

We are away from John again this morning, this Lord’s Day to celebrate Pentecost Sunday.

We began our worship this morning hearing the story of Pentecost from Acts chapter two.

Now we will be focusing on a different text: Acts chapter ten along with the first half of chapter eleven. Some refer to this episode as the “Gentile Pentecost.” This morning we will consider both what it means for redemptive history and also what it means now for us today.

This is a long text, but I encourage you to hang in there with me this morning.

With that said, we begin in Acts, chapter ten, verse one.

Please listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

^{10:1} At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, ² a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. ³ About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, “Cornelius.” ⁴ And he stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?” And he said to him, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵ And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. ⁶ He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.” ⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, ⁸ and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

⁹ The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. ¹⁰ And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance ¹¹ and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. ¹² In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³ And there came a voice to him: “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” ¹⁴ But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” ¹⁵ And the voice came to him again a second time, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” ¹⁶ This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

¹⁷ Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon’s house, stood at the gate ¹⁸ and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there. ¹⁹ And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Behold, three men are looking for you. ²⁰ Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them.” ²¹ And Peter went down to the men and said, “I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?” ²² And they said, “Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.” ²³ So he invited them in to be his guests.

The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him. ²⁴ And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ When Peter entered, Cornelius met

him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him.²⁶ But Peter lifted him up, saying, “Stand up; I too am a man.”²⁷ And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered.²⁸ And he said to them, “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me.”

³⁰ And Cornelius said, “Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing³¹ and said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God.³² Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.’³³ So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.”

³⁴ So 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.

^{11:1} Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying,³ “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”⁴ But Peter began and explained it to them in order:⁵ “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me.⁶ Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air.⁷ And I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’⁸ But I said, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’⁹ But the voice answered a second time from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, do not call common.’¹⁰ This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven.¹¹ And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea.¹² And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house.¹³ And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter;¹⁴ he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.’¹⁵ As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning.¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’¹⁷ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was

I that I could stand in God's way?"¹⁸ When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

"All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever." [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let's pray ...

Most merciful God,
We thank you that you have poured out your Spirit on us, your Church.
Holy Spirit, we ask you now to flood our hearts.
Revive our souls with your breath,
illuminate our minds with your light,
speak to us clearly, for you are the master of every language.
Grant then that we might truly hear your word,
be cut to the heart, believe your promises,
and put our hope in your work,
which we know is in perfect accord with the will of the Father,
and perfect unity with the work of the Son.
And it is in his name that we pray. Amen.

Our text this morning is an interesting one, with significance both in the history of redemption, as well as for our lives today.

And one of the first things we will notice about the events of Acts ten is that they are similar to, yet distinct from, the events of Acts chapter two and the account of Pentecost. So what is going on here and what is the relationship between those two events?

Well, while Pentecost itself happened in Acts chapter two, we might say that it is then echoed in several other historic events recorded in Acts, with these events of chapter ten being chief among those.

Pentecost, the pouring out of the empowering Holy Spirit on the Church, had a number of effects, and some of them are seen most clearly not in the event itself but in its reverberations – its echoes. We might say its aftershocks. The effects of Pentecost continue and are seen in these subsequent events.

And so our text this morning, with the Gentile reverberation of Pentecost, is making an important point about the work of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit.

And to understand that point, we need to begin by considering the place of Cornelius.

Cornelius, we are told in verse two of chapter ten, was a "devout man who feared God." Cornelius was not a Jew. He not only was not ethnically Jewish, but he also had not fully converted to Judaism by being circumcised and adopting the Levitical regulations of ritual purity. Yet his faith is emphatically affirmed in this passage as genuine.

As John Calvin points out, the list that Luke provides here about Cornelius emphasizes his faithfulness both in loving God and in loving those around him. [Calvin, 284] We read here that Cornelius feared God – but not only that, his whole family did as well. In other words, Cornelius led his Gentile household in faith in Yahweh, the God of Israel. He is head of a believing household. And lest we misunderstand what is meant by fearing God, Luke describes his reverent and worshipful faith further by telling us that Cornelius prays continually to God. The vision even seems to come at an hour of prayer for Cornelius. [Kistemaker, 371]

Then, in addition to his love for God, Luke mentions Cornelius’s generous alms-giving as a form of his sacrificial love for those around him.

The angel who appears to Cornelius then affirms these two elements, and tells Cornelius that these expressions of his faith are pleasing to God.

Luke is clear that Cornelius is to be considered a true believer. While Peter will mention in chapter eleven the call to believe in Jesus in order to be saved, the idea is not that Cornelius was unsaved before that; but that to continue in faith and salvation, as he has trusted in Yahweh so far, so now he must trust in Yahweh’s Messiah, Jesus Christ, who has accomplished salvation for him.

Cornelius was a believer. But he wasn’t a Jew. Where did this leave him?

Well, throughout the history of the Scriptures we are given this category of God-fearer – those who have not fully converted to Judaism, but have true faith in the God of Israel and live that faith out. In fact, the category even seems to be implied in the call of Abraham himself. In Genesis chapter twelve, God calls Abraham, and he says: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, *and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*”

When the promise is repeated in chapter twenty-two, God tells Abraham: “in your offspring shall all the *nations* of the earth be blessed.”

God called Abraham. And he called him to make of him a great nation – Israel. But that nation was not to keep its spiritual blessing to itself. Instead, that blessing was to spread to all nations and all families of the earth. And we get glimpses of that in the Hebrew Scriptures as Gentiles come to know and serve the God of Israel in faith, even without becoming Jews. [Jordan, 182, 211, 303-304]

And we see that category even more clearly in the New Testament – beginning with the ministry of Jesus. In Matthew chapter eight Jesus encounters a Gentile centurion who asks him to heal a member of his household. After this God-fearing Gentile expresses his faith in Jesus’s ability to do this, we are told that Jesus “marveled” and said, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.” And then Jesus expresses how many from outside of Israel will come and “recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,” while many descendants of Israel will not.

So from the call of Abraham through the ministry of Jesus we have this category of believing Gentiles who are saved by their faith in the God of Israel.

If that is so, then why were the Jewish Christians in Acts ten and eleven so hesitant about associating with a Gentile believer like Cornelius?

The answer is that in the history of Israel there had been a barrier between Jewish believers and Gentile believers. And that barrier was in part God-made, and in part man-made.

Let's consider first the ways in which it was God-made.

Because God made a distinction even back in Genesis twelve. Abraham and his family were called to bless all families and all nations, but as they were, there was still a distinction made between the household of Abraham and those outside of it.

And that distinction – that barrier – became even clearer under Moses. Under Moses God gave Israel laws for ritual purity. Suddenly a whole lot of things that others did – especially a whole lot of food that others ate – could make an Israelite ritually unclean. That led to further separation. Israelites had to live differently from those around them. God set up a cultural barrier. Why did he do that?

Well, that cultural barrier was meant to designate Israel, and set them apart for a holy spiritual purpose. And one chief element of that spiritual purpose was for them to be a priestly nation.

In Exodus nineteen God says to Israel: “If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

Israel is set apart in order to be a kingdom of priests.

And a priest in the Bible is someone who helps someone else worship and follow God. A priest assists others in drawing close to God – they serve as God's ambassador to them.

Israel had a group of priests within them – the Levitical priests – who helped them draw close to God themselves. But then Israel as a whole was to serve as a priesthood to help those outside Israel – to help Gentile nations to draw close to God. *That* is why they had to be set apart – to fulfill that calling.

And so, God placed barriers between two kinds of believers. There were Jews who were set apart to a special role, reinforced by the cultural barriers from the Lord, and then there were also Gentile believers, who could be true believers but did not have the same priestly role as Israel was called to.

That was the kind of barrier God put in place.

But as is human nature, that barrier was soon twisted. Soon the descendants of Israel had turned that barrier from a distinction of service into a distinction of class. Soon the distinction was not about ministering to Gentiles, but it became a barrier *against* Gentiles, and a class system that asserted the inferiority of Gentiles.

We see that even in our text. In verse twenty-eight Peter says: “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation.” Now . . . the Hebrew Scriptures do not prohibit a Jew from associating with or visiting a Gentile. It’s possible Peter is referring to table-fellowship here, in which case the ritually unclean food of a Gentile might ritually defile a Jew. Or he could mean that Jews in general believed that associating with Gentiles was unlawful, but he didn’t. Or maybe he meant that he thought the same thing until the vision he received. It’s not clear.

But one thing that does seem clear is that the Jews in the first century had come a far way from Abraham’s calling to bless all nations, and Israel’s calling under Moses to be a kingdom of priests.

God put a cultural barrier in place for a good purpose. People then twisted it into something different. All of that is at work in the separation of Jews and believing Gentiles in the first century.

But then we have the coming of Christ and the Holy Spirit, and those barriers are broken down.

In Ephesians chapter two we read that Jesus has brought the Gentiles near, and that he has made believing Jews and believing Gentiles one, by breaking down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility, making “in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace” and reconciling “both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.” [Eph 2:14-16] Christ accomplished this in his death and resurrection.

And now this morning we read how the Holy Spirit applies that reality to the church.

It begins with Peter’s vision. Peter is hungry. He sees a sheet come down with all kinds of animals – including animals that made one ritually unclean if you ate them. And God instructs Peter to eat them. Peter refuses, but then God says, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” And then the vision repeats a second time, and a third time, driving the point home. Now, what is that point?

Well, God seems to be making a point on at least two levels. On one level, God is reinforcing the end of the Jewish dietary laws – which means the end of the food laws that often separated Jews from Gentiles. So first, a major source of division between believing Jews and believing Gentiles is abolished. But then, we see in verse twenty-eight that Peter also interpreted the vision as speaking about people. He understood it as a calling to not consider Gentiles as ritually unclean or common. So first, God gives Peter a vision to reinforce the abolishing of this dividing wall.

Next, in verses nineteen and twenty the Holy Spirit directs Peter to go to the house of this Gentile believer – calling him to be with and fellowship with one that Peter himself later admits he would have been hesitant to fellowship with.

By the time Peter arrives at Caesarea and hears from Cornelius, Peter has understood enough that he preaches the gospel of Jesus Christ to Cornelius and his household.

But then the central event happens: As Peter is speaking, the Holy Spirit falls on the Gentiles – on all who heard Peter’s word. They begin to speak in tongues and extol God just as had happened to Jesus’s followers on the day of Pentecost.

And that parallel is important – in chapter eleven, verse fifteen, Peter tells the Jewish believers in Jerusalem: “the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning.” We need to notice that. The experience of these Gentile believers was *not* like that of the Jewish crowds that was converted on the day of Pentecost. The Spirit didn’t fall on them and make them speak in tongues. The Spirit fell on the disciples of Jesus in the upper room – the apostles and other believers who had been close to Jesus. As one commentator notes, by comparing the Gentile’s experience with the disciples in the upper room, Peter makes it clear that “there is nothing that might suggest a status as ‘second class citizens’ for the Gentiles.” [Marshall, 209] The way the Spirit falls on the Gentiles makes them equals with Jesus’s closest disciples, a sign that the barrier has been broken, and that any class distinctions between Jew and Gentile must be done away with in Christ.

Witnessing this, Peter gets the point, and he knows that these believing Gentiles need not become Jews before they can receive baptism and become full members of the Church of Christ.

When Peter returns, interestingly, it is the fact that he shared table fellowship with Gentiles that bothers the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. Peter has ignored the barriers – he has disregarded the class distinction. But then Peter explains that it was God the Holy Spirit who, applying the work of Christ, broke down the walls and demolished any class distinction.

After recounting all that happens, Peter declares: “the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning.”

And then we read of the response of the Jewish believers: “When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.’”

In the Book of Acts, the Holy Spirit is poured out to equip and to shape the Church of Jesus Christ.

In Acts chapter two, the emphasis is on the work of the Spirit equipping the church for its mission. In Acts chapter ten and eleven, the emphasis is on the work of the Spirit shaping the church in its mission – shaping it into one body, free of dividing walls and free of class distinctions.

What we see in our text is that through Pentecost and its reverberations, the Holy Spirit breaks down all boundaries between believers, and eliminates all classes within the Body of Christ.

In our text we see that God has even broken down the barriers that he himself had put up for a time – and so how much more must he break down all man-made barriers?

In this passage we see the Spirit break down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles. So ... from here on out, the question of the place of Gentile believers in the Church is taken care of once and for all ... right?

Well ... no. The debate would continue among Christians for years after these events.

God had demolished the boundary, he had destroyed the class distinctions ... and yet, over and over again in the years that followed, people would try to put those walls back up and establish those classes once more.

And they are not alone in that tendency.

What the history of the controversy over the place of Gentiles in the early church tells us is that despite the Pentecostal work of the Holy Spirit, we often erect new boundaries between believers, and new classes within the Body of Christ.

This tendency was true of the Jewish believers in the first century. It is true of you and me today. Our text this morning calls us to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit, and to relate to other Christians as part of one united body, rather than trying to erect walls and establish classes in the Body of Christ, which is our sinful tendency. The call of our text is to repent of our frequent denial of the Holy Spirit's work of uniting the Body of Christ.

But first we need to ask what boundaries we need to address. What are the barriers and the classes that we tend to set up?

I want to suggest a few possibilities, for your consideration. I give them as possibilities for you to consider. I don't know your heart – I'm not accusing you personally. But I am asking you to examine yourself. I am asking you to really consider each of these possibilities, rather than responding with defensiveness. I am asking you to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you which of these might be true of you. I certainly know that some of them are true of me.

So, with that said, what barriers do you tend to set up – what class distinctions do you tend to establish – in your heart, your mind, and your life, between you and other believers?

An obvious place to start might be thinking about denominations. Our church is Presbyterian and Reformed. Now, those are distinctions about what we believe and they are not things we should discard. I am a pastor in this denomination because I believe that our doctrinal standards summarize the Scriptures better than others do. And believing that is not a problem – we are called to hold to our convictions on the teaching of Scriptures.

What *is* a problem is when in my mind I turn that into a class system, with Reformed Presbyterians as the top class of Christians, and then other denominations making up lower classes beneath us. And so soon we decide that while we have a lot to offer other Christians, they don't really have anything to teach or to offer us. But this is a denial of the Spirit's full work outside our denominational boundaries – and is therefore a denial of the reality of Pentecost.

Or we might consider national lines. We might ask, even as we appreciate, and pray for, and support our Christian brothers and sisters in other nations, do we do this because we think of ourselves as the *main* Christians, and Christians in other countries as being more extensions of us – a form of second-class Christians? We once again can assume we have much to teach them, but that they have little to teach us.

Or maybe, a bit more poignant at the moment, the class distinctions we tend to make in the Church are along the lines of race and ethnicity. Like the above examples, this doesn't have to be intentional – but it could still be there.

If you are white, and involved with our mostly white church, one question to consider might be: Do you tend to think of the white church as the “default” church, and of churches with other racial majorities as more derivatives of the white church – or maybe more theologically suspect than the white church?

Or, do you look at non-white members of our church differently than white members? Or, are you fine with non-whites coming to our majority-white church, but if, say, you moved somewhere else, you'd never think to consider going to a church where you are the racial minority? Or, when events of racial tension happen in our country – as they have in the past week – do you tend to identify easier with and favor the perspective of non-Christians of your own race and political perspective, rather than with Christians of a different race?

If the answer to any of those questions is yes ... then what does it say about the barriers or classes in your heart, that the Holy Spirit has come to destroy?

Again, these are not accusations ... but they are tough questions for us to prayerfully consider – to ask whether they are true of us.

The list, of course can go on. Do we make political allegiance a dividing line, and think of Christians outside our political tribe as second-class Christians?

Do we make specific values badges of a higher Christian class – things like views on worship music, or Christian education, or something else? Again, there is nothing wrong with having strongly-held views on such things. The question is: Do we make it into a badge that shows some Christians are a higher class than others?

We might also consider whether we make distinctions and set up classes in our minds between different Christians based on their level of formal education, or their socioeconomic status. Would you be less likely to hear a rebuke from a Christian of a lower socioeconomic status than you? And if so ... what does that say about how you think the Holy Spirit works?

Or, do we turn the creational distinction of gender into a barrier of spiritual class in our minds or in our practices? Do we assume or act as if the Holy Spirit is somehow less at work, and has less to offer, through women than through men?

We could go on. But stop now and ask: What is it for you? Where do you see patterns like this in your heart, mind, or actions? Where have you knowingly or unknowingly put up barriers and established class distinctions within the Body of Christ?

And if Christ died to tear down such walls, and if the Holy Spirit came to destroy such class distinctions – if God tore down even the cultural barriers that he himself had set up – then how can we persist in trying to hold up our own?

Our erecting such barriers and establishing such classes – whether we do it overtly or subtly – is a denial of the Holy Spirit's Pentecostal work, and our text this morning calls us, like Peter, to repent and to embrace the work of the Spirit in making one unified Body of Christ.

Where do you need to repent in this way? Where do you need to cooperate with the work of the Spirit and see the unity he has made, in places where you had tried to make a division?

And once you see *where*, that of course leads to the question of *how*. *How* do you cooperate with the Spirit's work of eliminating such walls and class distinctions within the Body of Christ?

We get a picture of that in our text and we should mention at least three actions that are held here before us in Peter.

First, we need to see and believe the work that the Spirit has done to tear down such distinctions. Peter sees that here. He opens his eyes to the Spirit's communication to him, and the Spirit's work before him, and he allows himself to see both the work the Spirit is doing, and his previous tendency to deny such work.

That also means that Peter allows himself to see that the application of the Gospel is not just vertical – it is also horizontal. The application of the gospel does not just change things between individual human beings and God – but it changes fundamentally *how* human beings relate to one another. The first thing Peter did in our text is that he allowed himself to see that.

Second, Peter adopted a new practice: he engaged in table fellowship with those he *had previously* seen as a different class of believer than him.

Once you have identified some of the groups you tend to treat as a lower class of Christian, once you have seen that and seen that the Spirit works to abolish such barriers, the next step, as we see in Peter, is to pursue true fellowship with those believers. Be with them. Speak with them. Eat with them.

And don't just do it on your own terms. Do it on theirs. It was one thing for Peter to accept Cornelius's servants into the home he was staying in, on his terms. It was another when Peter stepped into Cornelius's house. And so, a second thing we see we are to do is to pursue table-fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ whom we tend to distinguish ourselves from.

Third – and the last point we will mention this morning – is that, in relationship with them, we are to see the Holy Spirit's gifting of them and we acknowledge it.

For Peter, that meant seeing and acknowledging that the Holy Spirit had fallen on these Gentile believers just as it had on the Apostles themselves at Pentecost. In other words, Peter saw that the Spirit was gifting and equipping these fellow believers, and he acknowledged that.

For us, this often means seeing and acknowledging the ways the Spirit has blessed Christians that we tend to think of as "other," and then humbly asking for their help in those places we know they have something to teach us. It means seeing and acknowledging the Spirit's work in them and then seeking to learn from them.

The prospect of these things might seem overwhelming. And in reality, some aspects would need to wait anyway under the current lockdown.

But we should begin to ask ourselves where we see these problems in our hearts, our thinking, and our lives ... and what it would look like for us to repent.

As we do, we do not really forge new ground. We aren't the ones who break down the barriers. All we do is cooperate with the work that the Spirit is doing and that the Spirit already has done.

Christ in his flesh has demolished the walls of hostility within his body. The Spirit has knocked down the barriers and overturned the classes that we so often try to establish.

Our calling is to turn from the sinful ways we elevate ourselves above other believers, and cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit.

Our calling is to see the work and the power of the Holy Spirit, to look at our brothers and sisters in Christ, and say with Peter, in Acts 11:17: If then God has given the same gift to them as he gave to me when I believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who am I that I could stand in God's way?

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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