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Text: Acts 10:44-48
Sermon: Water, Water, Everywhere
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44 While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. 45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, 46 for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 47 “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” 48 So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

God calls people to ministry in various ways...a persistent tug or a mountaintop experience or a seminal event. For me, I was given a vision of the Christian community in several pivotal moments that had a particular lasting impact on me and helped me to see the importance, beauty, and impact of what ministry and church could be. The first happened in the summer of 1985 at the age of 11. I lived in a small idyllic town in Texas where we did not lock our doors and the biggest controversies were things like running out of Blue Bell Ice Cream or the summer Martin Scorsese's film the Last Temptation of Christ had all the churches scandalized. I also grew up in a Presbyterian Church that reflected hospitality, love, and community, too. Once as I preschooler I left the nursery or Sunday School and ran across the street to the house where we lived. A church member saw me, came and got me, and reported my activities to my mom and I received a punishment for my transgression, but the point being is this was a church and community that cared for each other and watched out for each other. That year at Easter I was part of the confirmation class, what was then called the communicants class, of which there were about 5-6 4th or 5th graders who made their profession of faith, showed some awareness of the Westminster Catechism, Apostles' Creed, the Christian faith, and were welcomed into the full life of faith of the congregation.

Later that summer, right before the first day of school, when August is its absolute hottest, a member of that communicants class and his mother, an elementary school teacher, left church and walked to their car and were abducted by a stranger with evil intentions who was looking for some innocent and unsuspecting people. They were never seen alive again. And their abduction and murder shattered my innocence and the innocence of that community. But in the aftermath of those events, I also saw what church could be. How a community cared for the anguished spouse, how the community formed coalitions and relationships across race and class, and how the church cared for the people in its own community who were all victims of this horrific event. Sometimes I feel

guilty thinking about that whole ordeal and thinking that it may have had a role in setting me on the path of ministry and showing me what church could be, but the way that community acted in the aftermath of those slayings had an unforgettable impact on me and showed me that the church is more than a private gathering of individuals cultivating their religious selves, but that we are called to life together and to live out our baptism responsibilities for every member of our community and to love our world without becoming cynical, jaded, or reactionary.

The other event that helped me to see what ministry could be was a Christmas meal hosted at the church in my young adulthood. It was the brainchild of a local member of the congregation who was an auto mechanic and who later got his college degree, went to seminary, and served in ministry. He asked if he could host Christmas lunch at the church rather than just having a meal at home with his family. Christmas was not always a full or family time for everyone. There were many who might like company or like to be with others and what could the church do about it. So he prepared the mains, the turkey and the ham, and participants were asked to bring a side. But somehow the word was also put out into the larger community. Because it wasn't just church members who showed up at the Christmas meal. There were also the local drifters and those sleeping rough out on the streets. They showed up. At my table there was a couple from the Midwest, from Illinois as I recall, who happened to be driving through town, and who I am pretty sure confessed to me that they were wanted for some crimes back home and were looking for a fresh start somewhere new. And of course there were a good many regular run of the mill church people like me and you filling out the tables, dutifully remembering to bring our casseroles, and slightly uncomfortable with the wild assortment of others all gathered under one roof for Christmas lunch.

In fact, I remember distinctly, one of those church people coming up to me slightly discombobulated and frantic, hoping I would do something. 'There are people here who are not members of this church.' 'There are people here who are not supposed to be here.' Thankfully, I wasn't in charge, so I just nodded and smiled and probably secretly agreed with her that the guest list and admission list was not as selective as she thought it should be. 'There are people here who are not supposed to be here.' The problem is that could be true for just about any of us. Again, another vision of the kingdom of God, another occurrence of church, that got inside me and gave me a vision of what church could be, another example of God's grace that welcomes all the wrong

people and that reminds all the others in Peter's words right before our lesson, that 'God shows no partiality' (Acts 10:34).

When he was dean of Duke Chapel, Will Willimon tells the story of one of his students who had decided to take a spring break trip or a summer mission trip to Guatemala with a group of students through one of the campus ministry programs there. In the weeks leading up to the trip, he received a phone call from the student's parent and the parent was not happy. My child did not go to this school to mess around in Guatemala, the angry parent expressed on the other end of the line, how is that going to help get into a top law school or get a prized position at a Wall Street investment bank? Willimon listened and listened and tried to counter with some reminder that service to others is also an important part of college and these type of opportunities form a well rounded person who will do whatever profession with more compassion. But none of these answers were satisfactory.

And even, worse, the parent confessed, the student was even considering pursuing ministry rather than going to law school or getting a job at an investment bank which was why they were investing so much to send them to Duke in the first place. Who do you think you are, the parent ranted, ruining my child's life? At that point, Willimon pursued a different tack. Let me ask you something, he queried. Are you and your family part of a church community where you live? Yes, the parent replied, but what does that have to do anything. Were you and your child active in the church there. Well, yes, yes we were, the parent replied. But I don't see how any of that has anything to do with you ruining our college student's life the parent continued. How is that any of your business? And tell me, Willimon continued, in the church you are a part of, did you have your child baptized in that Christian community? Well of course we did, the parent retorted, what kind of people do you think we are, of course we brought our child for baptism. Well, Willimon replied, it sounds like your child was ruined a long time before they arrived at Duke Chapel. End of phone call.

In our passage from Acts, Peter and the rest of the disciples are astonished that the Holy Spirit is not just for them, but is poured out, in Luke's words, 'even on the Gentiles.' And Peter asks rhetorically, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' Or in the words of the well-meaning if slightly scandalized church member at that Christmas dinner long ago, 'There are people here who are not supposed to be here.' Yep, that's pretty much what baptism does, and as professor of

mission Darrell Guder reminds us, 'even the disciple of Jesus who was eyewitness to the salvation events (first hand) needed continuing conversion,' and to receive a vision of the Christian community that extended beyond his own expectations and boundary lines of where the Christian community should be.¹ Can anyone withhold water from these people who have received the Holy Spirit just like us?

In his book, *After Baptism*, theologian John Burgess writes that 'it is easy to [turn] baptism into little more than a sentimental ritual of welcoming a newborn baby into a congregation. The pastor sprinkles a few drops of water on the baby's head and parades him or her down the aisle. Those in the pews smile approvingly, and our gentle anointing makes everything about the baptism innocent and clean.' But as we have heard, and as Burgess reminds us, 'we have every reason to be terrified by baptism, and every reason to want to protect our children from it.'² Baptism may give us an identity we did not fully fashion for ourselves, put us into a community that we did not get to pick and choose, and sending us off in a direction that we never intended. Can anyone withhold water from these people who have received the Holy Spirit just like us?

Former President of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Ted Wardlaw, used to tell his children at various stages of their lives and maybe still today, 'Remember your baptism, and be grateful.' This practice was so ingrained in their lives that he recalls being out of town and checking on things back home and receiving this voice message, 'we are having some friends over to the house this afternoon, then this evening we are going to the movies and meeting up with more friends to hand out after, and I promise I will be back home before midnight and will call to let you know I made it home okay, oh and yes, don't worry, I will remember my baptism and be grateful.' The scary thing about baptism is that we don't control it and that often times its claim on us make us feel out of control. Baptism reminds us that we are not just our own, and the baby we baptized today, baby Jack, is not just Ella and Charles and Henry's, but he also belongs to God and to this community and his baptism declares to all of us that God keeps reaching out to us in spite of our flaws and failures and will use us for purposes far beyond our own plans and expectations to impact this world for the sake of Jesus Christ. So, may he and may we remember our baptism, and no matter where it takes us and what it might demand of us, may be grateful. Amen.

¹ Darrell Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 89.

² John Burgess, *After Baptism*, 3.