

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

John 15:9-17

Acts 10:44-48

Psalm 98

1 John 5:1-6

May 6, 2018

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

This morning, you may have noticed that the baptismal font is in the center of our aisle. It's not our usual placement. Our font is typically at the back of the church so as you enter, you can dip your fingers in the water and mark yourself with the sign of the cross – signifying this moment as holy, reminding yourself of your own blessedness, helping you live into the promises of your own baptism week after week.

However, the typical placement of the font – often as you enter a church – has another special purpose. It is placed along the aisle so that you may first be reminded of your new life through baptism. Then, it invites you down the aisle as you proceed to the altar to partake in full communion with God through the body and blood of Christ. It's a two-step process. You might say it is placement with a purpose. It is without a doubt a powerful symbol of our journey as Christians and one we are gifted to walk each week. But, my guess is that many of you never thought of the baptismal font as the beginning symbol of your journey to the Eucharist. Maybe you have never thought of the font to be that place where together we are welcomed – all of us – into the gift of God's saving grace in our lives. And all of this "welcoming" is great.

But, if I have learned anything in my years hanging out in churches it is that many people don't feel welcomed to partake of this gift or they feel excluded or they think they have to jump through some magical hoops to receive this water. And certainly there are two sides to this equation.

First, too many people have been taught that the healing gift of this holy water is exclusive or that God's love is limited. You know those perceived barriers – barriers based on sexual orientation, skin color, gender, nationality. Barriers based on the mistakes you have made or the crowd you hang out with. I am sure you know people who have struggled with this kind of message. The message that they are outside of this vague circle of righteousness that plagues too many people and too many churches.

Then there is the other side...the other side is those of us who think we hold the key to righteousness. We may not like to admit it, our ingrained judgements – because we all know how to be politically correct on the outside. That of course, this idea of an all-around loving God is a good thing but our minds often try to convince us otherwise. We may say that everyone is welcome but acting upon it with genuine heartfelt compassion is an entirely different thing. If we are honest, we have all had moments when it was hard to believe that God could love "that person."

It's challenging to take down our barriers, our traditions, our laws and open wide the gates of such radical generosity. It's also challenging to believe that such radical generosity and grace is meant for you if you have found yourself on the other side of that wall.

It's this dilemma that we find Peter in our reading from Acts this morning. Peter asks, "*Can anyone withhold the water of baptism from these people?*"

Peter's question may come across at first glance as inquisitive – at least I thought so when I first read this text. I thought he was trying to make sure everyone got to participate, that no one was left out and it seems as though he's doing the right thing, living without barriers and walls. But, there is a problem with our lectionary reading from Acts this week. It's too short. In fact, it leaves out the context that is taking place. In reality, things aren't quite what they may seem. I would argue Peter is struggling with his own circle of righteousness and is having a hard time letting others in.

So, this morning we are going to take a moment to back up and do a little bible study. Let me read to you a few verses prior to our reading from Acts. Chapter 10 begins like this...

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. ²He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. ³One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, 'Cornelius.' ⁴He stared at him in terror and said, 'What is it, Lord?' He answered, 'Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter.

Cornelius sends men to Joppa and while they are seeking Peter, Peter falls into a trance where...

¹¹He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. ¹²In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³Then he heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ¹⁴But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.' ¹⁵The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'

The men reached Peter and brought him back to Caesarea to meet with Cornelius. But Peter reminds him that it is unlawful for a Jew (like Peter) to associate with or visit a Gentile (like Cornelius). But Peter confesses that he had a vision from God which instructed him to not consider anyone unclean and he begins to share the Good News with the Gentiles. He tries to genuinely do what God desires. And he says these words... *'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.*

You may be thinking, that sounds great. How nice and open and accepting that was of Peter. But, wait. Let's go back to our text for today. Look at verse 47. What if we read his question in

our reading for today with a bit of sarcasm?

⁴⁷*'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?'*

This is probably closer to the reality of that moment. One of my professors from seminary, Mary Boys, wrote about this growing conflict in a 1st and 2nd century context where we find Peter. What was once an intra-Jewish debate of understanding the life of Jesus within their Jewish context was quickly becoming a wider circle of Jesus followers. Followers outside of the Jewish community. In other words, what may have once been a debate within a family unit, Jewish communal debate was now a more complicated equation with a more diverse group of early Christians, including a rapidly growing number of Gentiles who they weren't allowed to associate with.

So, Peter coming from this context, knew what he was supposed to do by his cultural standards but he also knew what God had told him to do. He confessed God's unconditional love and yet in the moment when he is faced with acting on that love himself, he hesitates. Do I really have to do this God? For these people? Is the water really for everyone?

Yet, our Gospel reading from John is unequivocal. *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.* And it's our duty, in fact our joy, to carry out this love not as burdensome as 1 John relates but as a simple act of love toward God. To be able to tell others that indeed this water is for them, that this church is for them, that this promise is for them. Truly, nothing can withhold these waters from you or from anyone else.

This morning, I want each of you to remember that this holy water is meant for you and also for the person you have a hard time loving. It is meant for those just like you and for those who you might have a difficult time accepting. It is meant for you when you do good things but it is also for you when you sin and fall short of God's will for your life. It is meant for you when you are angry and when you doubt, when you weep and when you rejoice. Because when you dip your fingers into this water, you are allowing God's grace to wash over you again and again, renewing you and remaking you. Bringing you back home and calling you to this table.

There is a blessing that a priest may use to bless holy water and it reads:

Almighty God, who through the water of baptism has raised us from sin into new life, and by the power of your life-giving Spirit ever cleanses and sanctifies your people. Bless, we pray you, this water for the service of your holy Church; and grant that it may be a sign of the cleansing and refreshment of your grace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

God's circle of love is boundless and each week as we walk in these doors we get to walk the journey from our baptism to the Eucharist. So as you come up for communion today, touch this water, walk this journey. Allow your heart to open and your spirit to be renewed. Because this water is for you. Thanks be to God.