

Acts 10:44–48

Ps. 98

1 John 5:1–6

John 15:9–17

Enabling the Spirit

Goal for the Session

Adults will identify situations of exclusion and reflect on ways to enable the Spirit's movement through their words and actions.

■ P R E P A R I N G F O R T H E S E S S I O N

Focus on Acts 10:44–48

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” A. Katherine Grieb

Peter’s question—“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”—underlines the priority of God’s action and the subsequent response of the church. To restate the words spoken to Peter in his vision at Joppa, “what God has made clean,” the church must not call profane (10:15). The pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius and his companions shows God’s acceptance of these Gentiles. They have received the gift of the Spirit (speaking in tongues and extolling God) “just as we have,” a clear reference back to the outpouring of the Spirit upon Jewish Christians at Pentecost.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Noel Leo Erskine

It is instructive that in Peter’s sermon in Cornelius’s house the Holy Spirit interrupts him again. It is as if the Holy Spirit seeks to remind the listeners that, as eloquent as Peter’s sermon was, what is crucial is not Peter’s perception of the gospel, but Peter allowing God to speak through and in spite of him. God was and is and must always be the subject of salvation. Peter was an instrument, not the source of salvation. The new revelation made possible by the inbreaking of the Holy One was clear.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Jeffrey D. Peterson-Davis

In this brief text we find exemplified the extravagance of the Holy Spirit and the wideness of God’s grace. This story demonstrates that the Spirit is not bound by the limitations that even faithful believers have. The Spirit is not only poured out on the Gentiles; it is given to the Jewish Christians, enabling them to see with new eyes and capture a new vision of the kingdom of God. This is an important text for the church today. Not only do the wounds of exclusion run deep in our culture and in the church; the realities of uncrossed boundaries still exist.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Barbara K. Lundblad

“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (v. 47). Peter echoes the question the Ethiopian eunuch asked Philip back in chapter 8: “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” Those who heard that story could have shouted, “Everything prevents you! You’re a different race, you are from a far-off country, you are a sexual misfit, and you have had very little instruction.” In both stories, there were good reasons to withhold the water of baptism. Yet the Holy Spirit surprised Philip on a desert road and surprised Peter in Cornelius’s house. The Holy Spirit can be disruptive.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Acts 10:44–48

Focus on Your Teaching

Adults live and work today in a sharply divided society. Whether it is about politics or religion or some other issue, people seem to exist on one side or another of boundaries that are clearly delineated and not to be crossed. God’s beloved community stands in contrast to such an exclusionary stance—at least in theory. Though adults may find conversations about inclusion to be uncomfortable and even troubling, where else but in the faith community can such dialogue take place? While some may exclude themselves from frank and open conversation out of fear, others may be willing to open the borders of their minds and hearts to the Spirit’s movement.

Holy Spirit, guide my planning and my leading, that I may include and not exclude. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- Christ candle
- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for May 16, 2021

For Responding

- option 1: copies of your church’s baptismal liturgy, bowl of water
- option 2: newsprint, marker
- option 3: hymnals, paper and pens

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, place a white pillar candle on a table. For option 1, make copies of your church’s baptismal liturgy. Fill a bowl with water. For option 2 in Responding, draw a large outline of a church on newsprint.

Greet participants with the traditional Easter greeting, “Christ is risen,” and encourage the response, “Christ is risen indeed.” Say that this is the sixth week of Easter.

Form pairs. Ask participants to recall an experience when they were excluded, and ask them to discuss:

- ✠ What were the reasons given to you for being excluded?
- ✠ What were your feelings about the experience?

Tell the group that today’s session offers the chance to see to how the Holy Spirit breaks into places of exclusion.

Light the candle as a reminder of the presence of the living Christ. Read Joel 2:28. Sit in silence for a few moments. Pray the following:

Pour out your spirit on us, O God, that we may to discern new understandings in your Word to us today. Amen.

EXPLORING

Explain that today’s focus scripture is the ending of an important story. You will first hear the story. Distribute Resource Sheet 2 (Readers’ Theater of Acts 10:1–42) and ask for seven volunteers to take the parts of narrator, angel, Cornelius, voice, spirit, men, and Peter. Have them read it aloud. Ask participants to scan through Acts 10:36–43 to get the gist of Peter’s

The conversational tone and contemporary vernacular of Eugene Peterson's *The Message* make it ideal for getting the sense of a narrative like the story leading up to today's Scripture passage.

Discussions about exclusion can make adults feel defensive or uncomfortable. Remind them the Spirit is not only a comforter. One way the Spirit works is to bring a fresh wind to bear on cherished and perhaps previously unexamined assumptions.

sermon. Have someone read aloud the focus scripture, Acts 10:44–48, the concluding event in this narrative.

Form two groups. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Acts 10:44–48). Ask one group to read the “What?” excerpt and Acts 2:1–17, the account of the Jewish Pentecost. Ask the other group to read the “Now What?” excerpt and the story of Philip and the eunuch in Acts 8:26–40.

In the large group, have groups discuss the following:

- ✠ What does the excerpt say about exclusion?
- ✠ What is the role of the Holy Spirit?
- ✠ What does each excerpt say about Peter's question in verse 47?
- ✠ In the “Now What?” excerpt, the writer cites some valid questions for preventing the baptism of the eunuch. What reasons might Peter have given for not baptizing?

Ask someone to read the “Where?” excerpt aloud. Encourage adults to look over the three excerpts and call out adjectives to describe the characteristics and actions of the Holy Spirit. Ask volunteers to describe how each of the main players in this narrative acted in response to the movement of the Spirit.

To transition to Responding, have participants read the “So What?” excerpt, and have them name additional descriptive words that expand the picture of the Spirit's characteristics and actions. Ask someone to read aloud the final sentence of the excerpt. Discuss:

- ✠ What are some wounds of exclusion in our culture and some uncrossed boundaries?
- ✠ Which of these are critical for the church today to address?

Invite participants to reflect on how the Spirit might be at work in the church.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session.

1. Examine and Experience Baptismal Liturgy By examining their baptism, adults can deepen their understanding of the radical nature of God's inclusiveness. Distribute copies of the baptismal liturgy. Invite adults to identify references to the Holy Spirit in the liturgy, including the words used as the person is baptized. Ask them to consider groups who may be included in membership but denied to leadership roles—in the past, women and blacks—and at present in many churches, youth and children and gay, lesbian, biracial, and transgendered persons. Discuss:

- ✠ On what basis do we exclude from full fellowship those persons marked by the Holy Spirit in baptism?

Invite adults to reflect on this question as they remember their baptisms. Pass a bowl of water from one person to the next, encouraging the words, “Remember your baptism and be thankful,” as a person dips his or her hand in the water.

**EASY
PREP**

- 2. Explore Boundaries** By naming boundaries that exclude others, adults can identify ways to allow for the Spirit's movement. Invite adults to describe who is *in* your congregation: racial or cultural groups, ages, sexual orientations, economic levels, political perspectives, and the like. Print them inside the church outline you created. Outside, print the categories who are *not* included. Form pairs, and assign one of the categories of excluded persons to each. Discuss:

- ✿ Why do you think these persons are not a part of our church?
- ✿ What does inclusion mean?

In the large group, ask pairs to report on their conversation. Discuss:

- ✿ What might our congregation do to make ourselves more open to the movement of the Spirit?

Have the group agree on one suggestion to offer to church leaders about making the church more open. Ask participants to reflect on places where the idea of inclusion of a particular group is uncomfortable, and pray for the Spirit to move in their lives.

- 3. Explore Hymns** By examining the lyrics of hymns about the Holy Spirit, adults can discern a picture of the Spirit's movement and identify ways to enable it. Distribute hymnals and paper and pens and invite participants to locate hymns about the Holy Spirit in the index. Ask them to jot down the hymn title and words and phrases that describe how the Spirit works. In the total group, name the hymns and tell how the Spirit is described. Ask:

- ✿ Which hymns describe the Spirit's comforting presence?
- ✿ Which paint a more restless, disruptive presence?
- ✿ How we might we be more open to the diverse ways that the Spirit is at work?

Invite the group to choose a hymn about the Spirit to sing together. Encourage group members to choose one that speaks to them personally and read over the lyrics or sing it at home in the coming week.

CLOSING

Invite adults to respond with a word or phrase that describes how they have experienced the movement of the Holy Spirit today. Encourage them to pray for the Spirit to be working in and through them as they continue to discern the will of God in situations of exclusion. Pray the following:

*Come, Holy Spirit. Make us instruments of breaking down barriers. Where we are impediments to inclusion, work in us to break down resistance.
Amen.*

If you used option 1 in Responding, set aside the newsprint sheet with the church outline for possible use in two weeks. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for May 16, 2021, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

Focus on Acts 10:44–48

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” A. Katherine Grieb

Peter’s question—“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”—underlines the priority of God’s action and the subsequent response of the church. To restate the words spoken to Peter in his vision at Joppa, “what God has made clean,” the church must not call profane (10:15). The pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius and his companions shows God’s acceptance of these Gentiles. They have received the gift of the Spirit (speaking in tongues and extolling God) “just as we have,” a clear reference back to the outpouring of the Spirit upon Jewish Christians at Pentecost.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Noel Leo Erskine

It is instructive that in Peter’s sermon in Cornelius’s house the Holy Spirit interrupts him again. It is as if the Holy Spirit seeks to remind the listeners that, as eloquent as Peter’s sermon was, what is crucial is not Peter’s perception of the gospel, but Peter allowing God to speak through and in spite of him. God was and is and must always be the subject of salvation. Peter was an instrument, not the source of salvation. The new revelation made possible by the inbreaking of the Holy One was clear.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,”

Jeffrey D. Peterson-Davis

In this brief text we find exemplified the extravagance of the Holy Spirit and the wideness of God’s grace. This story demonstrates that the Spirit is not bound by the limitations that even faithful believers have. The Spirit is not only poured out on the Gentiles; it is given to the Jewish Christians, enabling them to see with new eyes and capture a new vision of the kingdom of God. This is an important text for the church today. Not only do the wounds of exclusion run deep in our culture and in the church; the realities of uncrossed boundaries still exist.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,”

Barbara K. Lundblad

“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (v. 47). Peter echoes the question the Ethiopian eunuch asked Philip back in chapter 8: “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” Those who heard that story could have shouted, “Everything prevents you! You’re a different race, you are from a far-off country, you are a sexual misfit, and you have had very little instruction.” In both stories, there were good reasons to withhold the water of baptism. Yet the Holy Spirit surprised Philip on a desert road and surprised Peter in Cornelius’s house. The Holy Spirit can be disruptive.

Readers' Theater of Acts 10:1–42

Narrator:

Cornelius, a captain of the Italian Guard in Caesarea, had led everyone in his house to live worshipfully before God. He was always helping people in need, and had the habit of prayer. One afternoon he had a vision.

Angel:

Cornelius.

Cornelius:

What do you want, sir?

Angel:

Your prayers and neighborly acts have brought you to God's attention. Send men to Joppa to get Simon Peter. He is staying with Simon the Tanner.

Narrator:

So Cornelius called two servants and a soldier and sent them off to Joppa.

The next day, Peter went out on the balcony to pray and fell into a trance. He saw the skies open up. Something that looked like a huge blanket lowered by ropes at its four corners settled on the ground. Every kind of animal and reptile and bird you could think of was on it.

Voice:

Go to it, Peter—kill and eat.

Peter:

Oh, no, Lord. I've never tasted food that was not kosher.

Voice:

If God says it's OK, it's OK.

Narrator:

This happened three times, and then the blanket was pulled back up into the skies. As Peter was trying to figure out what it all meant, the men sent by Cornelius showed up.

Spirit:

Three men are looking for you. Go with them. Don't ask any questions. I sent them to get you.

Peter:

I think I'm the man you're looking for. What's up?

Men:

Captain Cornelius, a God-fearing man, was commanded by a holy angel to bring you to his house so he could hear what you had to say.

Narrator:

Peter invited them in and made them feel at home. The next morning he got up and went with them. The minute Peter came in, Cornelius was up on his feet greeting him—and then down on his face worshiping him!

Peter:

None of that—I'm a man and only a man, no different from you.

Narrator:

Talking things over, they went on into the house, where Cornelius introduced Peter to everyone.

Peter:

You know, I'm sure that this is highly irregular. Jews just don't do this—visit with people of another race. But God has just shown me that no race is better than any other. So the minute I was sent for, I came, no questions asked. Now I'd like to know why you sent for me.

Narrator:

So Cornelius explained what had happened.

Cornelius:

"You've been good enough to come. And now we're here in God's presence, ready to listen to whatever the Master put in your heart to tell us."

Peter:

Nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are—if you want God and are ready to do as God says, the door is open.

—Excerpted and adapted from Acts 10:1–42 in *The Message* by Eugene Peterson