

Follow: 6. Passion Powered
Acts 2:1-4, 14-15, 22-24, 32-33, 41
June 9, 2019
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There was a poster that hung in my high school band room that read: "For the common things of everyday, God gave us speech in a common way. For the higher things we think and feel, God gave us poets, their words to reveal. But for the heights and depths no words can reach, God gave us music, the soul's own speech." Many of us know and have experienced the power of music. Music can express our joys and our sorrows, our patriotism, our beliefs. When words are not enough, music can create the space for reflection and mourning. Music can unite us when nothing else can or does.

My husband, Jerry, has the best job in the world. He teaches music at the University of Minnesota. For the past 15 years, he has been invited to travel the globe and share the power of music with high school students from International High Schools all over the world. The students audition and if chosen, they travel to a selected destination to participate in a week long honor band. Jerry conducted bands in Vienna, Amsterdam, Shanghai, Manila, Seoul and Tokyo. Most of these students speak several languages but not all speak English. They represent every conceivable nationality, political party, religious conviction, and personal taste. But they are drawn together by a common devotion, a common love of music. This week-long experience is a beautiful exercise in living and supporting each other in community as they work together to interpret (with the use a lot of body language and gesturing) to communicate the instruction Jerry gives from the podium. The week's efforts culminate in a concert for family, friends and the local community. Just prior to every concert, Jerry inspires the musicians by saying, if the leaders of this world could do what you did this past week, this world would be a very different place. When the concert is over, everyone leaves, returning to their home countries, moved by an experience and a life-changing memory that is too great for words, one of life's supreme levels of emotion. Call it hokey but I think this might be a brief, shining, glimpse of the community that God intends for us. "For the heights and depths no words can reach...". This past week, as I read again the story of Pentecost and the gathering of the believers infused with the Holy Spirit, I was reminded of this quote from my high school days.

It had been just fifty days since Jesus had repurposed the Passover Seder meal in the Upper Room into a Meal of Remembrance the night before his death. Passover, for the Jews, commemorates the night God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Then fifty days after the feast of Passover, the Jewish people celebrate *Shavuot* commemorating God's giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai. *Shavuot* means "weeks" in Hebrew and it occurs 7 weeks after the Passover. It was also the time when the early summer harvest was celebrated and the first fruits of the harvest were brought as an offering to God. The name Pentecost is Greek and means fifty days, fifty days after Passover.

Luke tells us that Jews from around the world had gathered together in Jerusalem to commemorate the giving of the Law and the celebrating of the harvest. On this day, these believers, including the disciples, who had been in hiding just fifty days earlier, were so infused with the Holy Spirit because of the mighty wind and dancing flames, were now spilling into the streets. They were so filled with the Holy Spirit and the power of God, they couldn't help themselves. They began proclaiming the Good News of God, only they did so in languages they had not known before, in languages of the foreign Jews in the city for the festival!

A large crowd began to gather and some mocked the disciples accusing them of being drunk. Then Peter, spoke up and gave his first sermon. I can remember preaching my first sermon. I was terrified and I was preaching to a sanctuary full of people who I knew loved me and supported me and wanted to see me succeed. I can't imagine what it must have been like for Peter to preach to a crowd full of doubters, cynics and outright haters. But Peter, who just fifty days earlier had been fearful to call Jesus his Lord even to a servant girl, now raised his voice and forcefully declared that this wasn't inebriation. It was God pouring out the Spirit, as promised in the Old Testament, a trusted and treasured source for all Jews. *After that I will pour out my spirit upon everyone; your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions. (Joel 2:28)* Then Peter declared, "This Jesus, God raised him up. We are all witnesses to that fact." And the Jerusalem authorities and Roman rulers hated that message. They could have easily proved Peter and the early Christians wrong if they had just produced Jesus' dead body. But Peter knew they couldn't do that, because it wasn't there. Despite the risk that he could be arrested and put to death, Peter proclaimed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah and the rightful Ruler, not only of Israel, but of all people. He called them to repentance, to recognize the way that they had strayed from God's path, to yield their hearts and lives to God, asking for forgiveness and pledging to follow Christ. And on that day, three thousand people were baptized.

The implications of the Holy Spirit being given to all who were gathered that day says that it doesn't matter your status, your importance, your rank, ethnicity, gender, political party or age. What matters is that you are someone who says "yes" to God. Our God is in the giving business and what we see here is God giving the Holy Spirit to all of the disciples and empowering them to reach out beyond their familiar and safe boundaries. This was a cataclysmic event, the Big Bang of the church and it explains how a small group of frightened, puzzled, and largely uneducated men and women could so quickly become a force to be reckoned with all across the known world! Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Christian Church is born and given the authority to proclaim the good news of the Risen Lord. This was a group of people who probably had nothing else in common except this one thing: they loved Jesus. They were all there, their differences overcome, for the simple reason that they adored Christ. And Christians have been drawn together for the same reason ever since because of that bond in Christ. Today, when everything in the world seeks to divide us, Pentecost reminds us that Christians are people who are drawn together by a common devotion.

It is that sense of turning us outward, that Pentecostal moment, in which the Holy Spirit gives us a love for the world around us and the capacity to both speak and act in a way that is revolutionary. It gives us a different perspective and allows to see things in a new way. It enables us to own the Word of God, possess the Word of God and then take the Word of God out into our community.

While preparing for this message, I was attempting to look at this scripture from many different perspectives. I was turning it over, upside down and inside out and I had an "AH HA" moment that I want to share with you. This may sound crazy at first but stick with me. It's true, Pentecost is about remembering God's birthing the church. It's true, Pentecost is about the ability to worship God and enjoy the inspiration and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. And it's true that the church has to hear that Pentecost thrusts us out into the world to embrace our differences and diversity in common purpose. So now here's my epiphany. What if Pentecost is not about the Holy Spirit coming to solve our problems but instead to create them? To stir up unrest and dis-ease within us, to create new challenges and reveal new possibilities so that it is impossible for us not to look "up and out" and take the love of Jesus to this hurt and broken

world. Think about the disciples for just a minute here. After Jesus' resurrection and before the Holy Spirit came, they might have been tempted to go back to their careers as fishermen. I can imagine James and John saying, "Whooo! This was a wild and crazy three year ride, and that Jesus, he sure was a great guy. Maybe we just needed to get that out of our systems before we could settle down and take over the dad's fishing business." But we all know that didn't happen because once that spirit came, a return to normalcy was no longer an option for any of them. They were propelled into the world to herald the unlikely message that God had redeemed the world through an itinerant preacher from Galilee, who had just been executed for treason and blasphemy. The Holy Spirit did not solve the disciples' problems, it created a new one and revealed the compelling urgency to share God's Word.

In 2014, Messiah Church began a Breakthrough Prayer initiative. You'll find a copy of that Breakthrough Prayer in your bulletin this morning. This was a time in the life of our church, similar to now, that we were seeking to determine God's direction for the next 3 years. For those of you who were not here in 2014, and for those of us who may be a little fuzzy on the details of what a Breakthrough Prayer is, Sue Nilsen Kibbey, in her book, *Ultimate Reliance*, describes it this way: *A breakthrough prayer is a movement in which an entire faith community feasts on prayer as it's spiritual food, for vitality, energy and strength. It is a movement, not just a prayer class, new program or a sermon series. It doesn't replace the prayer practices that you already have in place rather, it's an additive component. It asks God to break through with new possibilities, hopes and dreams--without limits, both in the church and in our own lives, and that we will surrender ourselves to what God may unfold.* It allows the Holy Spirit to seep, flow or surge through all of our reservations, discouragements, questions and dead ends. It helps turn our focus from "down and in" to "up and out".

The leadership of the early church illustrated this for us-- this core, non-negotiable practice of ongoing prayer together seen as a privilege and a responsibility that opened the way for the Spirit to fuel a contagious movement of believers. If instead of prayer, we occupy ourselves with making plans and trying to do everything ourselves we can control what happens but those will never be God-sized dreams. It's much easier for us to do something ourselves than it is to pray to God and wait and listen. So, I want to invite you to a renewal of our Breakthrough Prayer movement. Take this card and tape it to your bathroom mirror, put it on your refrigerator, take a picture of it and keep it on your phone and then set a time for 7:45 am and pm. Then each day, beginning tonight at 7:45pm, pause in whatever you are doing and pray this prayer, knowing that we are praying this prayer together. When we pray together, we are drawn closer to God and closer to each other and we cannot help it but to allow ourselves to be thrust into the world to share God's love.

While it's really tempting to see that first Pentecost as a one time, nostalgic event that happened a long time ago, that kind of thinking numbs us to seeking God's ongoing work of love, blessing and redemption that is alive and well in this world right now, right here, through us if we will pray for a fresh outpouring of God's spirit upon us and feast on this prayer for our spiritual food. As Messiah's Strategic Planning Team is walking through a discernment process to establish the next 3 year plan, we are seeing evidence of Pentecost, even before the entire plan comes into focus. One of long term goals that has emerged is for us to build relationships between the families of Bloom and the people of Messiah Church. So as a pilot program, searching for ways to build authentic relationships and fill the gaps, Kami Pohl, our Community Engagement Director in partnership with the directors of Bloom, has organized 3 drop in dinners for Bloom families this summer, one in June, one in July and one in August. They'll be in Heritage Hall from 4:30-6:30. As families come to pick up their children they are invited to drop in, share a meal and connect in community with each other and the people of Messiah Church. The first

one is next week, as of today there are 60 people from Bloom signed up to attend and 26 people from Messiah signed up to bring food, set up, serve, clean up or share a meal with the Bloom families. This is the Holy Spirit at work through God's people. Pentecost happening before our very eyes.

So, since this is our last day with Peter, I should probably tell you what happened to him. Luke tells us that Peter kept on preaching—and performing signs in Jesus' name. He was a wholly different man because of what happened on Pentecost. Jesus' resurrection and grace replaced his fear with an earth-shaking boldness. Later when church leaders met in Jerusalem, Peter was a strong voice and he drew on his experience of preaching to Romans to point out that God "made no distinction between us and them." His testimony was a major factor in the decision to welcome Gentiles into the church. Christian tradition says he eventually died as martyr for Christ. Peter's passion, Peter's earth-shaking boldness, Peter's confidence in Christ is available to every one of us every time we say "yes" to Christ. Breakthrough prayer asks God to boldly use us and forces us to ask, what problems is the Holy Spirit inviting us into? What gaps are we being called to fill? Who needs us? As surely as God used Peter, we too have the potential for being bold witnesses to reach new people and heal a broken world.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of June 9, 2019

Weekly Prayer: Holy One, ignite within me a fiery passion for your mission in the world today. Warm me by the Spirit's dancing tongues of flame, that I may feel your kindling blaze within, urging me to do your greater good. Make me wholly present to experience a new birth, and awaken possibilities within me to share your love in the world. In this love and abundance, I come to celebrate your harvest—a harvest bearing the first fruits of the Spirit within me. Show me how to use these gifts, as I listen for your truth in the gentle breeze of your Spirit. Amen.

Monday, June 10

Scripture: Acts 3:1-16, 9:32-42

Peter and John were going up to the temple at three o'clock in the afternoon, the established prayer time. Meanwhile, a man crippled since birth was being carried in. Every day, people would place him at the temple gate known as the Beautiful Gate so he could ask for money from those entering the temple. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he began to ask them for a gift. Peter and John stared at him. Peter said, "Look at us!" So the man gazed at them, expecting to receive something from them. Peter said, "I don't have any money, but I will give you what I do have. In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, rise up and walk!" Then he grasped the man's right hand and raised him up. At once his feet and ankles became strong. Jumping up, he began to walk around. He entered the temple with them, walking, leaping, and praising God. All the people saw him walking and praising God. They recognized him as the same one who used to sit at the temple's Beautiful Gate asking for money. They were filled with amazement and surprise at what had happened to him. While the healed man clung to Peter and John, all the people rushed toward them at Solomon's Porch, completely amazed. Seeing this, Peter addressed the people: "You Israelites, why are you amazed at this? Why are you staring at us as if we made him walk by our own power or piety? The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the God of our ancestors—has glorified his servant Jesus. This is the one you handed over and denied in Pilate's presence, even though he had already decided to release him. You rejected the holy and righteous one, and asked that a murderer be released to you instead. You killed the author of life, the very one whom God raised from the dead. We are witnesses of this. His name itself has made this man strong. That is, because of faith in Jesus'

name, God has strengthened this man whom you see and know. The faith that comes through Jesus gave him complete health right before your eyes.

As Peter toured the whole region, he went to visit God's holy people in Lydda. There he found a man named Aeneas who was paralyzed and had been confined to his bed for eight years. Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you! Get up and make your bed." At once he got up. Everyone who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord. In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas). Her life overflowed with good works and compassionate acts on behalf of those in need. About that time, though, she became so ill that she died. After they washed her body, they laid her in an upstairs room. Since Lydda was near Joppa, when the disciples heard that Peter was there, they sent two people to Peter. They urged, "Please come right away!" Peter went with them. Upon his arrival, he was taken to the upstairs room. All the widows stood beside him, crying as they showed the tunics and other clothing Dorcas made when she was alive. Peter sent everyone out of the room, then knelt and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up!" She opened her eyes, saw Peter, and sat up. He gave her his hand and raised her up. Then he called God's holy people, including the widows, and presented her alive to them. The news spread throughout Joppa, and many put their faith in the Lord.

Observation: Jesus commissioned his followers to carry on his work (John 20:21). Acts reported, in vivid stories like these, that the Holy Spirit worked through Peter and John to offer Jesus' healing to anyone who needed it. Peter made the healing of the crippled man another occasion to preach Jesus' power. In Joppa, he was a channel through which that power restored the life of a woman who "overflowed with good works and compassionate acts."

Application: Tabitha (or Dorcas - Greek for "gazelle") may not have been much of a preacher, but God equipped her to sew, and gave her a heart for the poor. The "show and tell" in Acts 9:39 is a deeply touching scene. Tabitha loved people, lived out her love through her gifts, and influenced a whole city so well that God used Peter to help her live out her ministry longer. What are you able to do that God can use to bless others?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, wherever Peter and your other followers went, people's lives got better. I want to be like them, open to let your power flow through me to better the lives of others. Amen.

Tuesday, June 11

Scripture: Acts 4:1-14, 12:1-17

While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees confronted them. They were incensed that the apostles were teaching the people and announcing that the resurrection of the dead was happening because of Jesus. They seized Peter and John and put them in prison until the next day. (It was already evening.) Many who heard the word became believers, and their number grew to about five thousand. The next day the leaders, elders, and legal experts gathered in Jerusalem, along with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and others from the high priest's family. They had Peter and John brought before them and asked, "By what power or in what name did you do this?" Then Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, answered, "Leaders of the people and elders, are we being examined today because something good was done for a sick person, a good deed that healed him? If so, then you and all the people of Israel need to know that this man stands healthy before you because of the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is the stone you builders rejected; he has become the cornerstone! Salvation can be found in no one else. Throughout the whole world, no other

name has been given among humans through which we must be saved." The council was caught by surprise by the confidence with which Peter and John spoke. After all, they understood that these apostles were uneducated and inexperienced. They also recognized that they had been followers of Jesus. However, since the healed man was standing with Peter and John before their own eyes, they had no rebuttal.

About that time King Herod began to harass some who belonged to the church. He had James, John's brother, killed with a sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he arrested Peter as well. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. He put Peter in prison, handing him over to four squads of soldiers, sixteen in all, who guarded him. He planned to charge him publicly after the Passover. While Peter was held in prison, the church offered earnest prayer to God for him. The night before Herod was going to bring Peter's case forward, Peter was asleep between two soldiers and bound with two chains, with soldiers guarding the prison entrance. Suddenly an angel from the Lord appeared and a light shone in the prison cell. After nudging Peter on his side to awaken him, the angel raised him up and said, "Quick! Get up!" The chains fell from his wrists. The angel continued, "Get dressed. Put on your sandals." Peter did as he was told. The angel said, "Put on your coat and follow me." Following the angel, Peter left the prison. However, he didn't realize the angel had actually done all this. He thought he was seeing a vision. They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself. After leaving the prison, they proceeded the length of one street, when abruptly the angel was gone. At that, Peter came to his senses and remarked, "Now I'm certain that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod and from everything the Jewish people expected." Realizing this, he made his way to Mary's house. (Mary was John's mother; he was also known as Mark.) Many believers had gathered there and were praying. When Peter knocked at the outer gate, a female servant named Rhoda went to answer. She was so overcome with joy when she recognized Peter's voice that she didn't open the gate. Instead, she ran back in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate. "You've lost your mind!" they responded. She stuck by her story with such determination that they began to say, "It must be his guardian angel." Meanwhile, Peter remained outside, knocking at the gate. They finally opened the gate and saw him there, and they were astounded. He gestured with his hand to quiet them down, then recounted how the Lord led him out of prison. He said, "Tell this to James and the brothers and sisters." Then he left for another place.

Observation: Peter kept on preaching—and performing signs in Jesus' name, too. Now the very same people who asked Pilate to execute Jesus also imprisoned Peter and John and ordered them to stop preaching. But Peter was a wholly different man. Jesus' resurrection and grace replaced his fear with an earth-shaking boldness. (If you can, read Acts 5:12-41, which continued the story of the apostles' fearless refusal to back down.) God did not block all suffering or pain but did at times intervene miraculously to protect his faithful witnesses.

Application: This episode started in the scene we read yesterday—Peter and John healed a lame man in Jesus' name (Acts 3:6-10). The religious leaders had hoped Jesus' death would stop that kind of thing. Imagine their fear and frustration. And note the pointed irony in Peter's question: "Are we being examined today because something good was done for a sick person?" Have you ever resisted God in your life, hoping an inner conviction or calling would go away?

Prayer: Lord of all, sometimes your power opens prison doors. But always your power works in human hearts, transforming trembling fishermen into bold proclaimers of your saving power. Work in my heart today. Amen.

Wednesday, June 12

Scripture: Acts 10:1-29

There was a man in Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion in the Italian Company. He and his whole household were pious, Gentile God-worshippers. He gave generously to those in need among the Jewish people and prayed to God constantly. One day at nearly three o'clock in the afternoon, he clearly saw an angel from God in a vision. The angel came to him and said, "Cornelius!" Startled, he stared at the angel and replied, "What is it, Lord?" The angel said, "Your prayers and your compassionate acts are like a memorial offering to God. Send messengers to Joppa at once and summon a certain Simon, the one known as Peter. He is a guest of Simon the tanner, whose house is near the seacoast." When the angel who was speaking to him had gone, Cornelius summoned two of his household servants along with a pious soldier from his personal staff. He explained everything to them, then sent them to Joppa. At noon on the following day, as their journey brought them close to the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted to eat. While others were preparing the meal, he had a visionary experience. He saw heaven opened up and something like a large linen sheet being lowered to the earth by its four corners. Inside the sheet were all kinds of four-legged animals, reptiles, and wild birds. A voice told him, "Get up, Peter! Kill and eat!" Peter exclaimed, "Absolutely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The voice spoke a second time, "Never consider unclean what God has made pure." This happened three times, then the object was suddenly pulled back into heaven. Peter was bewildered about the meaning of the vision. Just then, the messengers sent by Cornelius discovered the whereabouts of Simon's house and arrived at the gate. Calling out, they inquired whether the Simon known as Peter was a guest there. While Peter was brooding over the vision, the Spirit interrupted him, "Look! Three people are looking for you. Go downstairs. Don't ask questions; just go with them because I have sent them." So Peter went downstairs and told them, "I'm the one you are looking for. Why have you come?" They replied, "We've come on behalf of Cornelius, a centurion and righteous man, a God-worshipper who is well-respected by all Jewish people. A holy angel directed him to summon you to his house and to hear what you have to say." Peter invited them into the house as his guests. The next day he got up and went with them, together with some of the believers from Joppa. They arrived in Caesarea the following day. Anticipating their arrival, Cornelius had gathered his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in order to honor him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Get up! Like you, I'm just a human." As they continued to talk, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them, "You all realize that it is forbidden for a Jew to associate or visit with outsiders. However, God has shown me that I should never call a person impure or unclean. For this reason, when you sent for me, I came without objection. I want to know, then, why you sent for me."

Observation: Even after watching Jesus minister to Samaritans and Romans, even after the events of Pentecost, Peter still felt a devout Jew's lifelong reluctance about mixing closely with Gentiles, especially Romans. God had to use a startling vision and a personal invitation from a pious centurion to propel Peter to break down some of those inner barriers.

Application: Peter reacted so strongly to his vision because, like all devout Jews, he carefully followed the laws (from Leviticus 11:1-47 and Deuteronomy 14:3-21) which forbade eating "unclean" meat. Those laws weren't about kitchen hygiene, but about ritual "cleanness" before God. Even entering a Gentile dwelling could bring ritual impurity. What made Peter's mission "clean"? Are there any places or people you avoid because you fear they might make you, in some sense, "unclean"?

Prayer: Loving Lord, my instinct is to divide the human family into “us” and “them.” Teach me what you taught Peter—that in your eyes, there is only “us.” Amen.

Thursday, June 13

Scripture: Acts 10:34-48

Peter said, "I really am learning that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him. This is the message of peace he sent to the Israelites by proclaiming the good news through Jesus Christ: He is Lord of all! You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism John preached. You know about Jesus of Nazareth, whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and endowed with power. Jesus traveled around doing good and healing everyone oppressed by the devil because God was with him. We are witnesses of everything he did, both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him up on the third day and allowed him to be seen, not by everyone but by us. We are witnesses whom God chose beforehand, who ate and drank with him after God raised him from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell on everyone who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. They heard them speaking in other languages and praising God. Peter asked, "These people have received the Holy Spirit just as we have. Surely no one can stop them from being baptized with water, can they?" He directed that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited Peter to stay for several days.

Observation: By this time, Roman emperors claimed to be divine, and used the title “Lord” to assert their supreme rule. Peter’s claim that he was preaching “the good news through Jesus Christ: He is Lord of all!” to an audience of Roman military personnel challenged the emperor’s supremacy. There could only be one “Lord” at a time. But pious Cornelius and his household were ready to accept that message.

Application: This successful evangelistic trip at first earned Peter some criticism (Acts 11:1-3). God’s mission was to all people from the beginning (cf. Genesis 12:1-3), but over time many of God’s people had come to believe it was about them, not everyone. How ready are you to rejoice when you hear about great success for some congregation, ministry or denomination other than your own?

Prayer: Loving God, your dream for our world, and the reach of your kingdom, are so much bigger than even my biggest imagination. Keep me ready for surprises, and to respond to your surprises with joy. Amen.

Friday, June 14

Scripture: Galatians 2:6-16

The influential leaders didn't add anything to what I was preaching—and whatever they were makes no difference to me, because God doesn't show favoritism. But on the contrary, they saw that I had been given the responsibility to preach the gospel to the people who aren't circumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised. The one who empowered Peter to become an apostle to the circumcised empowered me also to be one to the Gentiles. James, Cephas, and John, who are considered to be key leaders, shook hands with me and Barnabas

as equals when they recognized the grace that was given to me. So it was agreed that we would go to the Gentiles, while they continue to go to the people who were circumcised. They asked only that we would remember the poor, which was certainly something I was willing to do. But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was wrong. He had been eating with the Gentiles before certain people came from James. But when they came, he began to back out and separate himself, because he was afraid of the people who promoted circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also joined him in this hypocrisy so that even Barnabas got carried away with them in their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they weren't acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of everyone, "If you, though you're a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you require the Gentiles to live like Jews?" We are born Jews—we're not Gentile sinners. However, we know that a person isn't made righteous by the works of the Law but rather through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. We ourselves believed in Christ Jesus so that we could be made righteous by the faithfulness of Christ and not by the works of the Law—because no one will be made righteous by the works of the Law.

Observation: Peter never became a superhuman figure. He was not immune to peer pressure. The episode about which Paul wrote in this letter likely happened after Peter met Cornelius. Yet, under pressure from more conservative Jewish Christians, he pulled back from eating with Gentile Christians. That deeply upset Paul. All Christians were Christians due to Christ's grace; there was no room for treating any Christian as a second-class citizen in Christ's kingdom.

Application: Paul wrote that Peter "began to back out and separate himself, because he was afraid of the people who promoted circumcision." Peter was willing to hurt Gentile believers to avoid censure from the stricter Jerusalem believers. Have you ever faced disapproval from some Christians because you wished to support and befriend other, different Christians? Did you have more courage than Peter, or not? Would you today?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, "righteous" people criticized you a lot. You loved them, but you never let them force you to shut out people they thought unworthy. Give me that kind of warm-hearted determination, too. Amen.

Saturday, June 15

Scripture: Acts 15:1-2, 5-11

Some people came down from Judea teaching the family of believers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom we've received from Moses, you can't be saved." Paul and Barnabas took sides against these Judeans and argued strongly against their position. The church at Antioch appointed Paul, Barnabas, and several others from Antioch to go up to Jerusalem to set this question before the apostles and the elders.

Some believers from among the Pharisees stood up and claimed, "The Gentiles must be circumcised. They must be required to keep the Law from Moses." The apostles and the elders gathered to consider this matter. After much debate, Peter stood and addressed them, "Fellow believers, you know that, early on, God chose me from among you as the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and come to believe. God, who knows people's deepest thoughts and desires, confirmed this by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, but purified their deepest thoughts and desires through faith. Why then are you now challenging God by placing a burden on the shoulders of these disciples that neither we nor our ancestors could bear? On the contrary, we believe that we and they are saved in the same way, by the grace of the Lord Jesus."

Observation: Was circumcision required for Gentile men to be truly Christian? That issue kept causing conflict in the early Christian community. When church leaders met in Jerusalem, Peter was a strong voice. He drew on his experience of preaching to Romans to point out that God “made no distinction between us and them.” His testimony was a major factor in the decision James made to welcome Gentiles without heavy behavioral requirements (Acts 15:13-14). This was Peter’s last appearance in the historical narrative in Acts. Christian tradition says he eventually died as martyr for Christ. In a letter he wrote, we find the spirit in which he ministered and probably faced at the end of his life (1 Peter 5:6-11).

Application: The big issue at the Jerusalem Council is not a big issue among Christians today. (No one demands enforcing circumcision as a condition of being a Christian!) As we face our issues, we can learn from the fact that the Council chose to respect the evidence of the Holy Spirit’s activity, and not the concrete demand that all Christians follow Genesis 17:10-14. And we can learn from the example of Peter, Paul and “believers from among the Pharisees” who met at the Jerusalem Council. They disagreed about circumcision, but agreed on more central truths. They were all committed to following Jesus, and to trusting him as their Savior. What can you learn from Peter’s deep trust in Jesus’ grace, and his determination to share it with anyone who would listen to him?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you that, like Peter, I get to stretch my soul in the spacious atmosphere of your grace. Thank you for the widely varied family of which that makes me a part. Amen.