

May 17, 2009
Acts 10:44-48; Ps 98
I John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

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“The Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The ... believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.” (Acts 10:45)

This is a great day for us at Christ Church. Today we celebrate what God is doing in the lives of our young members: their creativity, their intelligence, their desire to help others and their burgeoning power to do so. So often, changes pass us by unnoticed: we look up from our hurried lives and find that buds have become leaves, children have become adolescents, relationships have changed, and we are standing on land that only looks familiar, but is wholly new.

Today, we take time to notice, and to rejoice. Gigi, Kendall, Adam, Pete, Helena, Caroline, Emma, Carol, Joe, and Chioma are becoming that most dreaded of things: teenagers. And surely, if there is any group of people living today who suffer unfair stigmas, it's teenagers. For the next few years, people will regard you as Gentiles! If you listen to the media, you will learn that you are now supposed to become moody, uncooperative, rebellious slackers, consumed by electronic gismos, prone to theft, violence, piercings, binge drinking, cattiness, and a host of other vicious behaviors. When I became a teenager, people suddenly reacted to me with suspicion. I was followed in stores to ensure that I was not shop-lifting, seated apart from others in restaurants in case my friends and I began to behave badly, greeted with alarm when we tried to sing Christmas carols at neighbors' homes. While I was still in high school, the press announced our fate: we were destined to be the first generation who achieved less than our parents. I remember gaping. We hadn't even started yet, and already they were acting as if the game were over. Stadium closed! Go home!

If you don't recognize yourselves in these descriptions, don't worry: God doesn't see you that way either. If you take nothing else away from church today, take this: God made you, and God doesn't make junk. When your friends treat you badly, when your classmates are mean, when people are pressuring you to do things which you believe are wrong, when you can't figure out who you are or what you want to do with your life, hold onto this truth: God loves you, and always will. It doesn't matter if you're perfect. (You won't be.) It doesn't matter if you're good-looking, although of course all of you are devastatingly attractive. (God sees your heart.) It doesn't matter if your friends think you are cool. God loves you, even when you don't love yourself. God sees what is good in you even when you cannot. God sees the promise in you, even when you cannot feel it. God gives his grace to you, not because you don't need it, but because we all do.

At the very beginning of Christian time, God sent Peter to the home of a man named Cornelius, a centurion, a man of importance in the Roman army. Now, Cornelius was a god-fearer (Acts 10:2), which is to say, a kind of skeptic and a kind of believer. God-fearers were pagans who found that the teachings of the God of Abraham were compelling, and seemed to teach a kind of truth. They studied the Bible, attended worship in synagogues, kept some of the rules of Judaism -- and yet, they were not Jews. They had not formally converted. Uneasy with the worship of the gods they had been taught to believe in, uncommitted (as yet) to the God who was coming into view, they lived on the edges of Jewish life, neither proper Jew nor proper pagan, betwixt and between.

And it was to one of these that God sent his impetuous friend Peter. Not, this time, to the people who already knew who they were and what god they served, but precisely to a man who was hungry for life, who wanted more than he had found, and did not know where to look. To this man Peter preached his gospel: that Jesus was ordained by God to judge the living and the dead, and that “everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” (Acts 10:43)

And while he was still speaking, Cornelius and his household were filled with the Holy Spirit, and marked as Christ's own forever, while the rest of the people sat their gawping. They got there by going outside what was expected, by inviting the stranger to their home and listening to his words, by daring to look for God among people unlike themselves, by daring to see that there is no person so unlike ourselves that we do not share a common humanity given by God.

Friends, my prayer for you this day is simple: that you may know the blessing of Cornelius. As you enter this territory between childhood and adulthood, remember that our God is the God who led the Hebrews through the desert, who formed Christ in the wilderness, who crossed every boundary of male and female, slave and free, to reach the hearts of his people. God is no stranger to people who are changing. God *came* to change people. Let God come with you as you enter these years, and you will find that even dangerous places can become holy ground.

And to the rest of you, let me say this: God is not done with you yet, either. I have been speaking mostly to the Rite 13 class, because this is their day, but you face the same pressures they do. Social pressure, exclusion, competing value systems, finding ways to use and enjoy our sexuality without hurting ourselves or other people -- these problems are not relegated to our teenage years. Each one of us faces situations each day in which we are invited to choose the way that leads to God, and tempted to leave it. Each one of us is a Cornelius, standing on the truths we have found in our lives, seeking ways to see that truth grow, and worrying that we may not have enough to pay the cost. But God's grace is free grace; the only price is our lives.

You do not know the places God will call you to go, the messengers God is even now sending to you. You do not know when you will see yourself a stranger, and know that the Holy Spirit is falling on you anew. Perhaps these young people we celebrate today have things to teach you about love, about service, about asking probing questions and living without easy answers.

In today's Gospel, Jesus makes an astonishing statement: "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." (John 15:15) I do not know what to make of this claim (I never have), except that Jesus is speaking of a kind of reciprocal faithfulness and honesty. A relationship between a servant and a master is one-way: the master commands, and the servant acts. A friendship needs to work in both directions. Yes, God has given us commands, and we are to obey them. But if we are God's friends, then God also listens to us: listens to our struggles, our desires, our joys and our fears. If we open our hearts to God in trust, we will be heard, although the answer may not be what we expect. The whole point of friendships is that they take us beyond what we expect of ourselves; friends bring out the best in one another.

St. Luke gives us the only portrait we have of Jesus as a young boy, and it is a portrait of such friendship. Some of you may remember it from your first lesson in Rite 13, two years ago. Jesus is twelve years old, and his parents take him up to the Temple to celebrate the Passover, as they did every year. When the festival had ended, Mary and Joseph went home, but, when they had traveled for a day, they noticed that Jesus was not with him. (*Honey, we've lost the son of God!*) Frantic with worry, they searched among all the travelers, then retraced their steps to Jerusalem. After three days, they found him sitting in the Temple, talking with the teachers. Surely, Mary and Joseph did not expect this kind of independence from their son. Surely, the teachers in the Temple did not expect to learn from a twelve-year-old boy. But when Jesus replied, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" what he was really asking was, *Did you not know that I must ask questions that matter, seek real truths, learn what God I wish to serve, what purpose I wish to pursue in my life, and dwell in that house forever?*

These are the real questions our lives are meant to answer. Seek them with all your heart. But know, while you seek, that you have already been found by the One who created you, sustains you in life, and gives you the will to know her. You may or may not have chosen her this day, but she has chosen you.

