

## Divergence on the Lectionary - Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year B

### First Reading

Acts 10:44–48

While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days. (ESV)

### Second Reading

1 John 5:1–6

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. (ESV)

### Gospel Text

John 15:9–17

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if

you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another. (ESV)

## Comments and Questions for Discussion

### First Reading

Our text from Acts this week is the conclusion of the story of Peter's visit to Cornelius, the centurion, and his family. I mentioned this reading last week, the way it marks a turning point in Acts, the first inclusion of Gentiles in the mission of the church. The Ethiopian eunuch (from last week's reading) may technically be first, but he disappears from the story of Acts and so does Philip after he baptizes the Ethiopian court official. Ethiopia represents "the end of the earth" to Luke and the Ethiopian's baptism speaks to the fulfillment of Jesus' words in Acts 1:10. The Gospel has gone beyond Judea and Samaria.

The baptism of Cornelius and his family signals the enlargement of the Gospel from inclusive of the Jews to the inclusion of the Gentiles. This is a far greater concern for Luke. We can discern this in part from the fact that this event is recalled immediately in chapter 11, and then cited briefly again by James in chapter 15.

Two things jump out at me from this story and its function in the larger framework of Acts.

First, it is Peter who first brings the Gospel to the Gentiles, not Paul. While Paul is given the appellation of "Apostle to the Gentiles" it is Peter who opens this door well before Paul takes up that work. When Paul is called before the Jerusalem Council in chapter 15, it is God's work through Peter that James cites in support of Paul's mission.

This is an example of the way that I think Luke tells the story of Acts (in part) as a means of bridging the gap between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Paul is not *responsible* for the mission to the Gentiles. He did not begin it, he only took up what Peter had already begun. Historically, we will see that this part of Luke's project failed with those who called themselves Ebionites ("the poor") who continued to reject Paul and Gentile Christianity, but Luke's plan remains clear.

Second, it is the falling of Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his family that convinces Peter that they must be baptized. This seems awfully important to me because it is the presence and power and influence of the Holy Spirit that binds all of Luke-Acts into one narrative. From the overshadowing of Mary in Luke one to Paul's quotation of the Holy Spirit speaking through Isaiah in Acts 28, the Holy Spirit is the tether that binds the whole story, every event, every character, into one. I think it would only be a bit of a stretch to think of Luke-Acts as "the Gospel of the Holy Spirit."

And for Luke, it is the activity of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles that "seals the deal" for him when it comes to the question of their inclusion in the Church, just as it did for Peter. This is important for me because I believe that if our more conservative siblings in the family of Christ saw the Holy Spirit at work more visibly in us, some of them (at least a few) might be convinced that God was at work in us, too. They might view us as "unclean" the way Peter saw Cornelius and the unclean animals, but they would be confronted with the truth of "What I have called clean, you shall not call unclean."

For decades I have ached to see bridges built between "conservative" and "progressive" Christians. The history of the Ebionites suggests to me that such a project will find it hard going and only marginally successful, but I believe in miracles, and I also believe that Luke has laid out a blueprint for building those bridges.

## Second Reading

The text selected for this week from 1 John gives us a few more clues about the divisions that have caused some former members of the Johannine community to "go out from them," splitting the community.

First, the concluding sentence of the first section tells us something. "Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" We can infer from this that there is some difference in the Christologies of the two groups. Could it be that while the secessionists accept that "Jesus in the Christ," they reject the title "Son of God?"

The second clue comes in the second portion, where John differentiates between someone who came in water only, and Jesus, who "...came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood."

Of course, these verses raise all sorts of other questions. What is meant by "water?" What is meant by "blood." Scholars have advanced a fair number of solutions to those questions, but I don't find any of them any more convincing than the others, so I'll list a few here and let you ponder on your own!

- 1) Water refers to the water of (His) baptism and blood to His sacrificial death.
- 2) Water refers to His coming in Spirit (water is used almost interchangeably with Spirit in some places in the Johannine corpus) and Blood His physical manifestation.
- 3) Water actually refers to Jesus' coming in/by the water of baptism with which He baptized others, and Blood the means through which he cleanses us from sin.

We can tell from the emphasis on “water AND blood” that this is a point of difference with those who have left. Do they somehow reject the need of cleansing from sin, as 1 and 3 might suggest? Do they reject Jesus physical manifestation? A kind of nascent docetism? That might fit with 2. That this text might seem to support the idea that John saw Jesus as a baptizer is interesting, but I couldn't make enough of the 1988 article to feel strongly about it one way or the other.

Still, these questions do seem to be worth thinking about if we're to read this in its own context.

#### Gospel Text

Sometimes I just want to shake translators. John 15:17 does *not* read as our translators have it in the ESV. Fortunately, most of you will be hearing some other translation on Sunday morning.

What it does *not* say: “These things I command you, so that you *will* love one another.”

What it *does* say: “These things I command you, so that you *might* love one another.”

I'm translating the subjunctive of the verb “love” as “might” rather than “may” as your translation might have it. (The NRSV reads “may.”) “May” can fit the sense of possibility that the subjunctive intends, as in “He *may* be able to do that, if everything falls just right.” But the way it reads in the NRSV it sounds as though the command gives *permission*. “Yes, you may do that.” “Might” conveys the full sense of possibility that the subjunctive carries.

Why all the fuss?

Because the ESV translators make the command into something that compels. “I command this so that you will do that.” What Jesus *says* is that He gives us the command to love because the command *empowers* us to love, creates the possibility. We

may yet not, but the command has made something otherwise impossible into something possible.

Think of it this way. You've taken your child to a theme park that is utterly, completely safe, so that they can be let go to do as they please without fear. At the gate you say, "Go! Have a good time!" That command isn't given to compel them to have a good time, it makes it possible.

This is why it's important to know the translation you're working from, and what the translators' biases are. I use the ESV for the Divergences because it's the easiest to use. They have, far and away, the most user-friendly online Bible and original language resources. But the people who created the ESV have a conservative tilt to their theology. They're hardly even translators at all. They bought the rights to the older RSV (Revised Standard Version) and retranslated only the bits that they needed to change to support their own exegetical needs.

So I probably shouldn't use the ESV, but I do. For one, I'm little lazy. Writing a weekly Divergence isn't all that easy, so when it comes to copying the text, I use what's simplest. But also, using a translation different from the one you're likely using in church means that we get to see the effect of translational bias sometimes. So even though they irritate me (but then, so do the NRSV translators) I continue to use this version.

But the wonderful thing about our reading this week is that it illustrates something I've said in other Divergences. I believe that commands *do not* create obligation or duty. They release possibility and empower it. Jesus' commandment to love doesn't make us bad, doesn't shame us into doing something we don't want to do, it *makes possible* something we couldn't do without the commandment. I say it this way, every commandment God gives us contains within it a kernel of power to accomplish the command. I don't believe that God ever asks anything of us without also providing the means to accomplish it.

It's difficult to describe, but for me this is what it means to "abide" or "remain" in God's love for us. We continue to stare into the glory of the love displayed on the Cross and we suddenly find growing in us the ability to love as we could not have loved before. Jesus' "command" is wrapped up in that process somewhere.