

Can Anyone Withhold?

Questions from Acts: Part 5 “Can Anyone Withhold?”

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – May 5th 2024

6th Sunday of Easter

Readings: Acts 10:44-48; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

Reflection: Psalm 98

Greeting: God is indeed my salvation; I will trust and won't be afraid. The Lord is my strength and my shield; He has become my salvation. Praise the Lord!

Prayer: Almighty God, we thank you for the gift of life that you have delivered to us, shown in the death of your Son. Help us to celebrate our Lord's resurrection as a sign of everlasting life. As we proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ the Son, help us to share the gift of love we find in you our Heavenly Father, and guide us in the truth of your Holy Spirit. May we be one with each other as we are one in Christ Jesus. May we love you with our whole being, and may we share that love with one another. And may we be reminded of your redeeming grace and steadfast faithfulness all the days of our lives. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 98

Protect me, O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory. The Lord has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations. He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God. Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises. Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord. Let the sea roar and all that fills it, the world and those who live in it. Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with equity.
(Psalm 98 NRSV*)

We read the words of Psalm 98, and we hear of celebrating God's love. That we should make a joyful noise and sing together because of the Lord. We hear of the joy that we have when we remember God's steadfast love and faithfulness. What is the song that fills your heart when you think of the love of Christ? What does that song inspire you to do in the world? Who is it you will be lifting up in your prayers this week? Who can you reach out to in order to share the love of Christ? What are you discovering as you live out your life in Christ?

Prayer: O God, our sovereign, our banquet, our crown: In the resurrection of your Son you have brought us into your palace. Train us to be heirs to your throne, that we may shield the needy. We thank you for all you have already done and the great love that has been shown to us. We lift up our joys and our concerns, bringing all things before you. We share with you the worries that we have spoken aloud. We share the celebrations that we have voiced together. Help us to also share the silent pleadings from within. May we experience your grace in our laughter and our tears. May you strengthen us in sorrow and in rejoicing, knowing you are with us. And may you guide us in love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Alleluia.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today come from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our first reading is from Acts chapter 10, verse 44 through 48.

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days. (Acts 10:44-48 NRSV)*

Our next reading is from 1 John chapter 5, verse 1 through 6.

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it who conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth. (1 John 5:1-6 NRSV)*

Our final reading is from John chapter 15, verses 9 through 17.

[Jesus said] "As the Father has loved me, so I have 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. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. 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. You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and

bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.” (John 15:9-17 NRSV)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

So, I have to open with the fact that I have rewritten this sermon multiple times throughout the week, with the last revision coming yesterday. As you know, this has been on the calendar for some time. This sermon was planned some weeks ago. And yet, it seems to be even more relevant this week than I ever thought it could be. Last Sunday, we had a question about whether or not somebody could be held back from baptism. And the question came from the person seeking to be baptized. We had the Ethiopian eunuch’s point of view, wanting to know if anything could hold them away from being accepted in Christ. This week, we have a very similar reading. This time, the question comes from the one doing the baptizing. This question of acceptance come after a remarkable week at General Conference for the United Methodist Church. Now, there were a lot of things that happened at General Conference, and I am going to have a special meeting in the coming weeks to go over everything once I can get a good summary and feel I’m able to answer your questions. As you may very well know, General Conference happens every four years and is our global gathering to set the budget and the rules for what it means to be a United Methodist. The last time we had a General Conference, it had been rather confrontational, to say the least. A change that I saw this year was that there was a spirit of cooperation that seemed to be based more in love than confrontation. And a big part of what was done in love and grace was to remove language from our rule book, the Book of Discipline. Many people, myself included, saw this language as harmful. And with an overwhelming majority, it was voted to remove the language and to move forward together.

Now, I can see parallels to our readings for this Sunday. I tried writing this without having all of that in mind and I couldn’t. It just seemed to be timely that our readings lined up for this Sunday and that my focus was on this particular question. So, I decided to let the Holy Spirit work and that maybe I chose this question to focus on for a reason. The question that we come up with today is “can anyone withhold?” It’s about Peter having a revelation about Gentile believers. Now in our reading from Acts, there’s a little bit of background that will help us. Peter had had a vision, a vision he didn’t understand where he was supposed to eat something that was unclean. And he did not understand why he was having this vision. Because Peter had never eaten anything unclean. He had held to the dietary restrictions of the law. But then some Gentiles call for Peter to come see them. That Cornelius, who was known as a righteous and God-fearing man, is wanting Peter to come see them. So, Peter goes to see these Gentiles. While addressing them Peter realizes that God has shown him he doesn’t need to be the judge of what is clean or unclean. Peter doesn’t need to judge who is in or who is out. And because of that, he goes to see the Gentiles. Peter finds out that Cornelius was praying and was told to seek him out so that they could learn from him. Peter then has this revelation that God shows no partiality, that God is there for all people. He celebrates the Holy Spirit, he

celebrates the love of Christ, he celebrates all that God has done, and that God is there for all of his people. And it's here that we step into our reading for today with our main point. As Peter is saying all of these things, the Holy Spirit falls upon those who are there. And the circumcised believers are in shock. Because the Holy Spirit has come to these uncircumcised Gentile believers. These unbaptized, uncircumcised, Gentile believers. And Peter asks our important question, "can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So, they are all baptized in the name of Jesus Christ and Peter is invited to stay with them. This is also important because of what else it leads to. Because one of the things this leads to is the Jerusalem Council that decides that the laws regarding circumcision and the laws regarding dietary restrictions do not need to be observed. The things that are holding back the Gentiles from being fully accepted by the circumcised believers are relegated to being optional so that there can be unity within the church. That those barriers are removed so that they may be able to embrace the love of Christ more completely. In a way, this meeting that Peter has helped to change not only Peter's mind but the course of the church in general. Because between the testimony of Peter and the testimony of Paul, the council decides that they should change the rules so that they can extend grace and love to all people. And I couldn't help but see the parallels with what we saw at our own General Conference this week. I have heard that question Peter asked echoed in so many ways. "Can anyone withhold?" Can anyone withhold the love of Christ from another? Can anyone withhold full participation in the church from those who have been called to follow Christ?

We see support for this in our other readings today. In the Gospel of John, we have Jesus once again repeating that we must love our neighbor and love God if we are to follow him. That we must abide in his love and love one another so that our joy may be made complete. That Christ's commandment to all his followers is to love one another just as he has loved us. That we are friends in Christ, because we know what it is Christ asks of us. It is not that we chose Christ, but it says that Christ chose us, and that through the love of Christ we may love one another. And I can hear that in what Peter is saying, when he is asking who can withhold the love of Christ from these people? Who can withhold baptism in the name of Christ when the Holy Spirit has already shown Christ's love? We hear that again echoed in the letter from John. That everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God. And we have this echo of the way that we are to love one another. That we listen to Christ, and we love in Christ's name because he has asked us to love. That we are guided by the Holy Spirit. And as we see in Acts, we see the Holy Spirit guiding Peter into this radical acceptance.

I want to note here that I think Peter had to reflect on all this. That after this revelation, I think Peter had to really sit down and think about how to move forward. Because he also needed to think about how to help others to understand what he had learned. Peter took some time and when he could explain it all, he shared it with the council in Jerusalem. That after his mind was changed, he learned how to help others to understand why his heart and mind had

been changed. Because when we have a major change, we often struggle to fully understand the scope of it. But I do know that Peter's mind was changed. And that Peter reflects this in the way that he lives from this point on. But it also meant Peter had to be bold enough to stand up and repeat this to others. That he had to be bold and share this story so that people who believed how he used to believe would come to understand.

Because Peter is advocating for a greater understanding of God's love. He isn't saying that rules don't matter. He is saying that the foundation of faith is the love of Christ. And if the Holy Spirit came to these Gentile believers, then they should see where God is taking them. If the Holy Spirit can see past the things that we think are important, then maybe we need to learn from the Holy Spirit to see past them as well. And this is actually a fairly common thing that we see with Christ. Because Christ calls us to ask if the way we uphold the rules is causing harm. He does that with the law itself. He does it when they want to condemn the woman caught in adultery. He asks that it be those without sin to cast the first stone against her, and everyone walks away. When Jesus heals someone on the Sabbath he asks if the Sabbath law is really more important than somebody being healed through the love of God. Jesus sees it when he drives out the money changers and the animal sellers from the temple. Because the way they were holding to the law was causing harm instead of good. And we see that same thing here with Peter. Because Peter has to ask if adherence to these dietary restrictions and the law of circumcision are causing harm to those who have been called to follow Christ.

And I think that is a question that we are always called to ask. Because we are always called to do no harm, to do good, and to stay in love with God. And I think it is right that we consider whether or not our rules are doing more harm than good. Because if they are doing more harm than good, it is time to rethink the rules. And we did that this week at General Conference, with a lot of questions, a lot of discussion, but most importantly, it was done with the grace and love of Jesus Christ. My challenge to you for this week is to think about what it means to love in the name of Christ. I want you to think about the example that Peter sets for each and every one of us. That Peter is willing to change because he understands that he is part of something much bigger than himself. That his eyes are opened to an even greater truth than he first understood in Christ. That the love of Christ was bigger and bolder than he had ever imagined. Peter learns to embrace that change. He becomes a voice arguing for love and acceptance. I pray that we can all follow Peter's example and be voices arguing on behalf of Christ's love. That we can all be voices arguing on behalf of Christ's grace. That we can stand up for those who have been hurt, been ignored, and that we can be voices of healing because of Christ's love. That we may embrace those Christ embraces. And that we may love and let our joy be complete together in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us

mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Questions from Acts

Our Easter series explores questions that we will take from our readings from the Acts of the Apostles. Each week we will reflect on the early church and the lessons we learn from the questions that they press us to answer.

April 7th – Who Is In Need?

April 14th – Whose Power Is This?

April 21st – By What Name?

April 28th – What Is to Prevent Me?

May 5th – Can Anyone Withhold?

May 12th – Who Will Witness?

May 19th – What Does This Mean?

Prayer List

Rev Angie Lee	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Eric Veach
Ed & Verna Titus	Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney
Tricia Adkins	Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead	Lauren Stewart
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Richard Durham	Kathy Hanks	Emily Blade	Tim Schnauz
Donna Carlen	Ernie Peters	Jess Shoot	Stanley Kiser
Corine Howard	Don Gilmore	Shirley Jester	Marsha Overton
Linda Carlen	Michael Nichols	Paul Cox	Taylor Waldorf
Harriet Tucker	Marlene Kincaid	Cara Dillier	Peggy Farley
Mandy Schumacher	Ann McMorris	Marci Cutts Smith	Jaydelyn Brassard
Pat Hayden Titus	Devona Dittamore	Nancy McElravy	Marie R.
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Cathleen Carl	Gary & Mary Winterrowd	Leo Smith	Larry Thompson
Greg Williams	Jim & Kay Wells	Earl Sparks	

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