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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Acts 10:44-48, John 15:9-17

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴⁷“Can any one forbid water for baptizing *these people* who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (Acts 10:47, RSV)

Our Lord Jesus wants not only the outsider, but also the one who *feels* himself to be an outsider, *feels* herself to be an outsider. That is Christ also wants the downhearted.

This is a sermon about the baptizing of “these people,” as St. Peter refers to Cornelius and his household. I have another group of “these people” on my heart today. I think it is because of our sorrow at the passing of our member Alan Hoffman: I mean folks struggling with depression. For the Gospel is bigger than even the baptism of the Gentiles. Indeed, whoever you are and whatever your heartache, substitute your own name for “these people,” and that will be just fine, for the Gospel is that Christ wants all of ‘em -- all of “these people.”

Our text comes from our First Lesson, from Acts Chapter 10. It is a story sometimes called “The Pentecost of the Gentiles,” because that is the notable thing about Cornelius: he is a Gentile. He is a Roman soldier. Peter is the one whose words I want to lift up. Peter has come into this Gentile household, preached to them a little while, and has been astonished to see that Cornelius and his household have broken forth in an ecstasy of the Holy Spirit, including speaking in tongues and extolling God. And so Peter wonders about baptism:

⁴⁷“Can any one forbid water for baptizing *these people*... (Acts 10:47, RSV)

Let me begin with this morning’s Gospel Lesson from St. John, Chapter Fifteen. In this morning’s Gospel Lesson, we have heard, in unforgettable fashion, the beautiful duty of *love* laid upon Christians. Jesus is speaking to his disciples. Time draws short. The betrayer will soon be at hand. Urgency compresses the farewell discourse of Jesus to its central matters, and among those matters, Jesus speaks chiefly of love:

¹²This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

¹³Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.... ¹⁷This I command you, to love one another. (John 15:12, 13, 17, RSV)

And naturally, we ought always to cherish this emphasis on love, uphold it, and seek that love should govern our lives.

Yet we will never arrive at the true majesty of Christian love till we reckon with its wide scope. Any drop of love is good, of course it is, but an ocean of love is even

better! And that is the importance of this morning's story about the baptism of Cornelius. This is a story which teaches what is called the "catholicity" of the Church. I mean, the universal nature of the Church -- the way Christ is restless and yearning and unsatisfied till every person on the face of this earth is able to understand that Jesus loves him, loves her. The Church is universal, hoping to win every soul to the faith, striving to fetch every soul to Christ.

When Peter recounts the story of the baptism of Cornelius, a Gentile, his theme is that from first to last, this baptism was the work of the Holy Spirit. It is with the Spirit that we have to do when we think on the baptism of Gentiles.

And by the matter of his defence, he [Peter] shows that in no one point was he the author, but in every point God, and upon Him he casts the whole. "The trance," he says--"it was He that caused me to fall into it, for "I was in Joppa," etc.: the vessel--it was He that showed it; I objected: again, He spake, and even then I did not hear: the Spirit commanded me to go, and even then though I went, I did not run: I told that God had sent me, and after these things, even then I did not baptize, but again God did the whole. God baptized them, not I." (Chrysostom, Acts 10)

The reason Peter has to make this argument is that when Peter's fellow disciples back in Jerusalem hear tell of what Peter has done, how he has baptized a household of Gentiles and even eaten supper with them, they are appalled and challenge him as to why he had done these things. Peter then calmly and methodically tells the story, ending with this searching question: "what was I, that I could withstand God?"

¹⁷Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?

¹⁸When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life. (Acts 11:17-18, KJV)

That is the nature of the Book of Acts, from Philip's baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch to Paul's preaching in Europe in Rome itself: We find that the Holy Spirit judges things differently from us. We might find distinctions of food and race to be important, but the Spirit does not. The Spirit simply yearns for people -- all of them! And so the Holy Spirit drives the apostles, especially St. Paul, hither and yon in search of humanity.

And it seems to me that this is good news for anyone who finds himself, finds herself, feeling a bit out of place in this world, a bit ill-at-ease. If no one else on this planet wants you, dear ones, Christ wants you!

Out of place and unwanted: so Cornelius could have felt before the apostle Peter. Peter was a Jew, Cornelius was not. From his mother's knee, Peter knew the great stories of God from the Bible, Cornelius did not. Peter disciplined himself by strict dietary rules, Cornelius did not. Peter was one of God's people, Cornelius was from "the nations." Indeed, if Cornelius knew anything at all about Jews, he knew that he

was unwelcome to them in any intimate way. Especially, he had little hope of dining with them. Yet the point of the story is that the Holy Spirit wanted Cornelius, this outsider. And the Holy Spirit wants you and me too, even if somehow we should be outsiders in this world.

This is what leads me to think about those who struggle with depression. I am no expert on this subject. I am not a therapist, nor do I suffer much with depression. But Carol and I have had many friends who do, and likewise, we have had parishioners who do. And so I want to talk about depression a little bit, aiming to be humble and modest before an immense and complex reality. But depression ravages the spirit of people, and I want always to uplift the spirit through the Gospel, so I dare to put my idea into words: I want the depressed one to know that Christ loves you, wants you, and is working to save you.

It seems to me that a sad thing about depression is that it renders the depressed one ill-at-ease in life. The depressed one knows that most folk have their ups and downs, yet the depressed one also sees that those folks have a kind of peace about them, as if they simply trust that they fit into this world, they belong here. But the depressed one, almost by definition, does not feel himself, feel herself, to be part of the “in crowd.” The depressed one entertains thoughts that most folk do not entertain. Indeed, the depressed one lingers with dark thoughts.

There was a very moving article in last Sunday’s *New York Times* about depression. It was written first hand, by a woman who had struggled with depression from childhood and who had recently been hospitalized for it. The article was striking for many reasons, but part of it was simply visual: the banner on the article showed a photo of the author and what seemed to be one of her journal entries. Her words were written in heavy, jagged script. Her words were very painful to read:

**I HAVE SAT IN SHRINKS’ OFFICES GOING ON FOUR
DECADES NOW AND TALKED ABOUT MY WISH TO DIE
THE WAY OTHER PEOPLE MIGHT TALK ABOUT THEIR
WISH TO FIND A LOVER.¹**

A few years back I happened to drive a psychologist down to Fort Dix, so that we could make a visit in the federal prison there. This was not long after September 11, 2001, and the horrors of that day still were still fresh. As we drove by the New Jersey seaports, I pointed to all the containers stacked up – the trailer parts of a tractor trailer. They were waiting to be loaded onto ships or maybe they had been brought by ships and were waiting for distribution.

So I looked at those acres of stacked up containers and said to my colleague, “You know, there could be a nuclear device hidden in one of those containers.” And the psychologist immediately answered, “Yes, but healthy people have the ability to deny that.”

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/10/magazine/10Depression-t.html?_r=1&emc=eta1

I was fascinated by this. It is not that crazy people have the ability to deny reality, but it is the healthy people who can do it. It is the healthy ones who can hide from troubling facts. But the depressed one seems not to have that ability or to have lost it somewhere along the way.²

And I guess that could be one source of depression: depression is sometimes a rational response to a depressing situation. The depressed one sees the truth about things and cannot pretend that they are better than they are. Maybe, then, the depression will pass when the depressing situation gets better. Meanwhile, they have suffered a blow, maybe a death of a loved one or discouraging news about illness. They have suffered a blow that rocks their soul, and it is naturally that they should be depressed for a while about it.

But even with my layman's eyes, I can see that the causes of depression are often much more complex and mysterious than a rational response to a depressing situation. Sometimes, depression is not simply related to some depressing situations in life, but lies deeper, in the wounds of childhood that even a good childhood can give, and in the structure of personality and the deep, instinctive ways we have come to greet and experience life.

Jesus once said that he was a poor man, that the birds of the air have their nests and the foxes have their dens, but that he had nowhere to lay his head. But the depressed one hardly has a place to lay her head, lay his head even if he does have a nest or a hole or an apartment. They have lost their peace. Maybe they hardly ever remember having any peace. They might watch sports, but they are not thrilled by them. They eat food, but receive little delight from it. They live life, but get little joy therefrom. They judge themselves harshly, as if they do not think themselves worthy of happiness nor of heaven. And this harsh evaluation sometimes leads them into trouble.

A few months ago Carol and I attended a clergy retreat with old friends from our Pennsylvania days. There we were stunned to hear that one of the elderly clergy in another synod had been arrested and taken away in handcuffs. Apparently, the man was arrested for offering money for sex with a woman he was counseling. She was so dismayed, she went to the police, who put a wire on her to record the conversation, sent her back to the pastor, who again offered her money for sex.

I do not know the truth of this case, just the report, but I checked the website and see that the pastor has been removed from his congregation, and the report is very troubling. First off, it is troubling for the woman, to have her confidence so shaken by the pastor. But also it is a tragedy for the pastor and his family and his ministry. Two things seem pretty likely about the case. First, the man wanted to get caught. And second, if he had been talking with someone, he might have been spared from a deed that was horrible for everybody in sight.

The reason I speak of this is that depression can tempt us to hurt ourselves and others. The inner sense that we do not belong, that we have lost or never had standing

² By the way, this business of confronting troubling realities increases my respect and sympathy for homeland security people. It dawns on me now that to do that work is to voluntarily enter into a kind of insanity, in which the person deliberately studies and imagines precisely the kinds of possibilities that healthy people can deny.

in this world, that we hardly fit in can lead us to frantic, immoral, and self-destructive deeds.

But the Holy Spirit does not want that. The Spirit wants the depressed one to cling to Jesus and to avail oneself of the ministry of the Good Shepherd's angels, including therapists or medicine if need be.

Recently I read an article in the *New York Times* Sports section about a football player for the Philadelphia Eagles -- Shawn Andrews, two-time Pro Bowl Offensive lineman: 6'5", 330 lbs, playing a very rough and tumble sport, where self-confidence is very important. Yet the interesting thing about Shawn is that he wrestles with depression and speaks openly of his struggles.

He was too big as a boy. Kids made fun of him. He was made to think that his only natural place in life was football, though he did not much like the game. No father in the house. He was raised by his mother, down in Arkansas. They were poor. He quit college because it broke his heart that his mother had lost her job and had no money while he was off at college.

To this day he has the sense that he does not fit it. And that means he that he is precisely the one the Holy Spirit especially seeks. The Spirit wants Cornelius, who was thought to be an implausible candidate for the Church. The Spirit wants the depressed one who feels out of place in this world. Indeed, the Spirit wants every suffering soul.

During Holy Week I speculated that Judas might have suffered from depression, from what is called "acedia" or sadness of soul. If so, then one good lesson to learn from his tragedy is that the sad one should stick as close to Jesus as possible. Whatever our emotions, in our conduct, at least, we should draw near to Jesus. The tragedy of Judas is that after receiving the Blessed Sacrament, he went out, as the text puts it, leaving Jesus behind. He went out, into the darkness:

He then having received the sop went immediately out: and it was night.
(John 13:30, KJV)

Indeed it was night, whenever we walk away from Jesus.

Jeremiah of old warned us that the human heart is complex and mysterious:

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:9, KJV)

But Jesus knows it. Your friends, your relatives, even your therapist might not know your heart perfectly, but Jesus does and he means to grant you peace one day. Meanwhile stick as near him as you can.

And if you are happy and strong, then join in the adventure of the Holy Spirit in befriending those who are depressed or feel themselves to be outsiders. Indeed, befriend them in the best possible way, which is to introduce them to your friend Jesus Christ, who is counting on you to help him find the people of this earth, and to Whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.