

You can't put a bridle on the Spirit of God!

Acts 11:1-18

May 2, 2010

I'm going to tell you something that is exciting, and unsettling. You can't put a bridle on the Spirit of God!

You are Peter. You're a fisherman, a follower of Jesus, an apostle, the rock on which Jesus said he would build his church. To what do you bear witness?

The resurrection of Jesus.

And what is it that inspires you and guides you and empowers you as you do?

God's Holy Spirit.

You are Tim Ensworth. You're a husband and father and grandfather, a follower of Jesus, a pastor. To what do you bear witness?

The resurrection of Jesus.

What is it that inspires you and guides you and empowers you as you do?

God's Holy Spirit.

You are the people of the First Congregational United Church of Christ. To what do you bear witness?

The resurrection of Jesus.

What is it that inspires you and guides you and empowers you as you do?

God's Holy Spirit.

Do you notice a pattern? Do we need to know anything else?

We bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus is the good news that saves us and will save the world. Because the resurrection of Jesus means the victory of love over hate, the victory of life over death, the victory of possibility over impossibility, the victory of hope over fatalism, the victory of God's power over the powers of this world. The resurrection of Jesus means the best of God's gifts to us endure, and the worst of what this world can do to us amounts to nothing.

If God can raise Jesus from death, what do you think God can do with you?

No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, is there any reason to give up?

If God can raise Jesus up, crushing the powers that did their best to do away with him, what do you think God can do with jealousy, with pride, with greed, with prejudice, with injustice, with war? Whatever obstacles beset us or disasters befall us, is there any reason to give up?

We bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus, saying to any who will listen: "Look! There is another way, a way that leads from brokenness to healing, from enmity to reconciliation, from warfare to shalom, from despair to joy, from death to life!"

And as we bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus, we are inspired, guided, and empowered by the God's Holy Spirit. We are not left alone. We are not left to go it on our own, to follow the path as best we can with map in hand. The Spirit of the Lord is with us, working in us, working through us, working among us. The Spirit is God with us. The Spirit of Jesus is among us and alongside us.

The Spirit is God's breath, filling us and refreshing us. The Spirit is God's wind, blowing us where it wishes to lead us.

The Spirit is a truth-teller. The Spirit shows us who God is when we pay attention and tells us what God wants when we ask.

The Spirit binds us together. "We are one in the Spirit."

And the Spirit is a gift-giver. "The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all."

Isn't that exciting? Isn't it exciting to know that God's Spirit is among us, the personal, vibrant, passionate, powerful presence of God in us and among us and alongside us, as close to us as breathing? God is not an idea or a moral symbol or a distant and impersonal and unknowable force of nature. God is here, with us, among us!

Isn't it exciting to watch God's Spirit at work, inspiring and revealing and empowering and reconciling and gifting and challenging? What do you see God's Spirit doing?

I see God's Spirit in Dom and Eric and Cliff and John and Joanne and Jessica and Natalie and Beth and Kay and Diana and Celeste and Paul and Richard and Don and Roger, sharing their love of music in a way that blesses both them and us.

I see God's Spirit in Ed, and those who worked with him for two years, carefully studying and planning how we as a congregation could best meet a need for child care in our community

I see God's Spirit in Connie, bringing Jean, the older woman she cares for, to Easter worship, letting her experience firsthand the joy of the good news and the music and being among God's people.

I see God's Spirit in the four generations of Margaret's family, sitting together in the pew, encouraging each other and us in our common spiritual journey.

I see God's Spirit in our Sunday School as we tell stories and collect money week by week in support of the work of Oxfam, believing in some small way we can make a difference in the lives of people scattered around the globe.

I see the Spirit of God in the movement among members of the United Church of Christ to live out in practical terms the implications of our slogan: *No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.*

It's exciting!

And it's unsettling. It's unsettling because we like to be in charge. We like to keep the reins in our hands.

It's not about being bossy, about having to have things our own way. Okay, sometimes it is about that! But it's more about just being clear, about knowing what is expected. We like things to be predictable, consistent, under control. Tell us the rules and we'll keep them and enforce them. Just don't go changing the rules on us!

We like to think of ourselves as stewards: stewards of the church, stewards of the faith. We have been entrusted with this church and we will support its work and maintain its heritage and guard its traditions. We have been entrusted with our faith and we will defend its principles and guard its traditions and live by its precepts. We have been entrusted with the Way, Jesus' Way, and we will hold on to it and protect it and preserve it and defend it.

We think of ourselves as stewards, stewards of a received tradition. We will guard our tradition and defend it. We will guard the honor of our God and defend him. Except that God doesn't need us to defend him!

What we have received is not a tradition, but a relationship. We are stewards of what God has given us, but the best of what God has given is himself, and what God is and does is not subject to our control. The wind of God's Spirit blows where it will, where God wills. We can't keep God or our faith in a box. You can't put a bridle on the Spirit of God!

Peter! You were a guest in the home of uncircumcised Gentiles, and you even ate with them!

Sound familiar? Who else was accused of eating with the wrong people? Jesus!

God's Spirit is always correcting us, stretching us, challenging us, enlarging us. How broad is God's love? How wide is God's embrace? What can separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord?

Something extraordinary happened in Caesarea, when the Spirit came down on the Gentiles, too. It shocked and scandalized the Judean believers. But something equally extraordinary happened in Jerusalem, when they heard Peter's story and saw what he saw -- the wind of God's Spirit blowing in a new direction. Something extraordinary happened then: they let go of the reins!

... they stopped their criticism and praised God, saying, "Then God has given to the Gentiles also the opportunity to repent and live!"

Are you prepared to let go of the reins? Are you prepared to recognize the new directions the wind of God's Spirit is blowing in our own day?

You will need to listen, carefully ... because God is still speaking!

You will need to watch, to pay close attention ... because God's Spirit is still moving among us, calling us and guiding us and sending us.

You will need to be humble ... to be ready to change your mind, to be ready to learn something new, to be ready even to let go of cherished traditions when the Spirit of God leads in a new direction.

Because of the resurrection of Jesus, because of the presence of the Spirit of the living God among us, there is only one time and one place to be faithful: right here and right now!

This is the day the Lord has made! Let us be glad and rejoice in it!