

Acts 10:44-48      ESV      **The Holy Spirit Falls on the Gentiles**

<sup>44</sup> While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. <sup>45</sup> 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.** <sup>46</sup> For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, <sup>47</sup> **“Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”** <sup>48</sup> **And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.** Then they asked him to remain for some days.

1 John 5:1-6      ESV      **Overcoming the World**

**5** 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. <sup>2</sup> By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. <sup>3</sup> For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. <sup>4</sup> **For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.** <sup>5</sup> **Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?**

<sup>6</sup> 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.

John 15:9-17      English Standard Version

<sup>9</sup> **As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.** <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> These things I have spoken to you, **that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.** <sup>12</sup> **“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.** <sup>13</sup> **Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.** <sup>14</sup> You are my friends if you do what I command you. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> These things I command you, so that you will love one another.**

**Sermon.** As we read 1<sup>st</sup> John, Acts and John we have been getting weekly reminders of God's challenge to us to love each other. That is where we are today.

This week we have been catching up on the most recent season of *Call the Midwife*. If you aren't familiar with the program, it's on PBS on Sunday nights on Masterpiece Theater. It is a great program – in my view perhaps the best on TV for a decade (that's how long it has been playing). It is set in the East End of London during the years after World War 2 when the area was recovering from the blitz and beginning to feel the currents of the multitude of changes in England and the world that resulted from not only the war, but the passage of time as changes seemed to happen at the speed of light. The East End was a tough place – exceptionally poor and hard impacted by German bombing and economics. Now, the title tells us that the show is about midwives, and it is, but it is much more than that. The medicine in the show serves as a marker of time – polio and other diseases and the advent of vaccines. And some terrible markers, such as thalidomide.

But, **what the show is really about is the community.** People attempting to help each other not because they were being paid to, but because it was the right thing to do. **I think that it is a microcosm of shalom – not because it is perfect, but because the community shares that sense of love that we call the peace of God.** Poplar, the particular neighborhood being served, has all of the problems you can expect in a place full of people. It isn't particularly religious and the characters run the complete range of good and evil. In the first season half of the midwives were nuns, while in the current season there are only three nuns – all the others are secular. In this particular season one of the episodes had one of the principle, long term characters – the local jack of all trades handyman – develop tetanus. The community rallied around the family and, in a telling moment, the oldest nun – more or less retired – admonished the other nuns about their fatalism regarding the disease and likely outcome (death). The elderly nun simply said that she was heading off to pray and that they were welcome to come. They did. And two of the least religious – I'd call them agnostics – midwives joined them not to pray, but because they wished to be where prayer was happening.

**The point of the episode, and virtually all of the others I've watched, is one of community. The reach of all people for shalom, whether they call it that or not and whether they see that as a need or not. People still die from preventable disease, bigotry and greed are alive and well. But, the undercurrent that always prevails is a far**

**more expansive notion of love than we, as people, consider since it goes beyond us or even us and an immediate person, but inevitably draws in all of Creation.**

The Buckfield library has a book entitled *'There You'll Find Me.'* I ran into it several years ago and was taken with a central theme for the lead character – whenever she found herself overwhelmed or in doubt, she repeated to herself this phrase from Paul in Romans: ***"in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."*** Today's 1<sup>st</sup> John text – ***"everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God"*** - is strikingly similar to Paul's comment. Let's focus on this.

**In our world we want whatever we want whenever we want it.** We want a world where we set the rules or at least the rules are the ones we would set if given the chance. **When we read 1<sup>st</sup> John or Paul and consider being conquerors or overcoming the world, it is usually in a triumphal sense – that we will triumph. Because of who we are as humans, triumphalism sneaks in everywhere.** It's in the dictionary. It can be in our daily lives – how we deal with others around us, how we consider our own homes, how we view national concerns. **It is in our national mentality – indeed, I would say that nation states always carry with them this sense of national destiny and triumphalism. It has been in the Church, arguably from the time of the early Church until now. It does not belong there or here and, in my view, is contrary to what we believe as Reformed Gospel Christians.**

**Fundamentally, I think that triumphalism is 100% human and has zip to do with God, our Maker, Savior and Sustainer. Our notion of us as conquerors, overcoming the world, tends to be about us. Me centric.** Is that Scriptural? No, if for no other reason it once again makes idols of us. So, **what John and Paul are speaking of is not me centric, but Christ centric. It is not us overcoming the world or conquering in a worldly sense, but in something much more radical. It is our search for shalom in our lives. This is Finley's search in the book *There You'll Find Me*, as it is in so many people in Poplar of the midwives. First we must embrace that the world mindset is not ours. The worldly matters that we get caught up in are, in the Creation**

**perspective, trivial.** A pastor I knew in Virginia used to say that whenever faced with a problem we needed to view it with a 7 year mindset: **“will this matter in 7 years?”**. If the answer was no, then it was trivial and not worth the contention that arguments always create.

We conquer or overcome the world not as I think most people believe – through hard work, good people skills, and some positive qualities on our parts. For sure those things are important, but if I have learned anything in my lifetime, it is that approach ensures that we are forever disappointed.

**Central to what the Epistle and Gospel texts talk about today is obedience to God and emptying of self.** Love is always framed in God’s terms (shalom), not ours. The Acts text takes us to a practical matter – the Jewish Christians of the early church were dumbfounded to observe **the Spirit moving in Gentiles that were among them. This did not fit into their notion of God in the world – in their world you had to be Jewish to have God with you. In their new church you had to be Jewish to be baptized. The Acts text radically disabuses the Church of those human notions. Just as the Ethiopian eunuch saw that he should be baptized on the spot, so Peter makes the same observation about the Gentiles. Those early Jewish Christians may have asked themselves how this could be?**

**It could be because it was and is about the community that God ordained in shalom.** It is still all about God.

1. **It is about His call to love and care for each other and the world around us.** In the full sense of shalom. The community in Call the Midwife.
2. **We cannot get there without finding peace – shalom – in our relationship with God.** That is what John and Paul are saying – we overcome the chaos of our lives and the world not through ourselves but through Him. That is what conquering means. **It is not us conquering the world, but God and His shalom conquering the chaos that tries to reside in us all.** We can undergo all the counselling available, but in my opinion it won’t have an impact unless we have a sense of the Divine perspective about us as individuals.

**3. If we seek to overcome or conquer through ourselves, then we are destined to always be at cross purposes with God – we are being self idolatrous.**

**We must allow space for God in our hearts. That is what is happening with the Gentiles in today's Acts text. With God in our hearts, then we should find ourselves listening to Him. With God in our hearts we can actually find that we can love ourselves since we know that God's love is within us. If we love ourselves, then we have a frame of reference for how we can fulfill the Epistle and Gospel commands to love each other – because it will be how God loves us, how we love ourselves and how we, then can both love God and each other.**

In the movie *Field of Dreams* there is a scene toward the end when the uncle/brother finally sees the ballplayers. He is astonished and wonders where they were a moment before. The answer is that they had always been there – he had just been so self absorbed, so full of his own chaos, that he could not see them. He could not love anyone around him, or even himself. His was not a world of community. And then it changed.

A caution for us that relates to the Acts text. **I remember many years ago when a junior high school student a year behind me was part of the youth group at the church we attended.** There was a worship service one night and he was there but hesitated to come in – for the simple reason that he was not dressed up. Now, Roland knew he was welcome at youth group, but saw the sanctuary and worship as a place apart – somewhere he could not go, as if it were the Temple in Jerusalem. The church had never articulated a dress code, but since everyone went in dress clothes, it was assumed that it was a requirement. The church had, unwittingly, set an arbitrary bar for anyone to just walk in. **That is the first lesson – the bars we set that keep people away may not be ones we intentionally put in place. They are perceived. Shalom keeps those bars away.**

In the Acts text Peter sees the Divine embrace of the Gentiles through the Spirit and initiates baptisms – to underscore to the household that they are now part of this universal faith. It is Peter who extends this hand of fellowship, not a statement by the Gentiles that they want it. **That is a lesson – those who come may not know what they may not know in terms of faith. It is our responsibility to reach out and welcome their faith.**

Finally, we must grasp the truth of Jesus' statement about the commandment to love one another. **This is really another way of stating the importance of being in community – that we love each other.** It is the current that runs through every episode of *Call the Midwife*. **In that community based on shalom, under God's grace in faith, we find the full measure of joy available to us, no longer constrained by our own prejudices.**

Recently I made the comment that it really is simple. It is grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, Scripture alone and giving all glory to God alone. And the lessons of the Wilderness run through the fabric of our faith – that we follow God (and tune out the chaos of voices attempting to distract us), we accept His sufficiency, we refuse to take on any God other than Him, and that **we embrace each other in community as we seek to see in each other the person God made in His image.** When we fail to find joy in life, consider if it isn't because we have found other gods to distract us and failed to learn and apply those Wilderness lessons. **It is really that simple.**

In God's grace alone, in faith alone, in Christ alone, through the guidance of Scripture alone may we give all glory to God alone as we seek to live the fulness of life that He has given us. It is God alone who conquers, who overcomes.

Solideogloria. Amen.