

Sometimes they run up. Or they come jumping. Hopping. Pointing and grasping. They shy away. Look at Mom. Suck their thumb. They're clutching toys and eating snacks. They say, "Amen" or they keep silent. They jut out their hand or gingerly bring it forward.

In all my time handing out Communion, I've seen them do all these actions and more. They will do as they wish, and sometimes, these little children wish for the body of Christ. And one at the front of the line before me, they sure won't be denied.

So I . . . give them the bread. The body. Because who am I to withhold the bread for communing these children who have been baptized in the font—many times our font—and who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?

Some believers may think it odd—to give bread and body to the very young, the uninitiated, the unprepared. It seems out-of-order, giving them the body of Christ before they have First Communion instruction. It's not how the church usually does it. Having Communion long before hearing their confession and far before Confirmation is definitely outside of the tradition as some of us know it.

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In our story this week from Acts, Peter finds himself in the middle of a situation that seems mixed-up, out-of-order, and definitely outside the tradition he knows.

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Acts 10:44-48  
Psalm 98  
1 John 5:1-6  
John 15:9-17

Our reading is like walking in the middle of the movie, where a number of scenes have already taken place. And we've missed two important dream-sequences. In one, Peter, a religious Jew who is following in Jesus' new Way, undergoes a trance in which he's famished and a blanket full of non-Kosher meat he's not allowed to eat by Jewish law descends from the sky, and a voice tells him to eat it. Three times Peter says, "No way!" and three times the voice says, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." The trance ends, leaving Peter puzzled, and probably still hungry.

Then there's another dream-sequence with a man named Cornelius, a centurion and a devout man who feared God, but who definitely wasn't Jewish or a Jesus-follower. *He* has a strange dream in which God tells him to go find Peter. And he complies. Cornelius' servants go find Peter.

While Peter once might have turned down Cornelius' offer, because going would violate the expectation of his religious tradition, now, Peter has had a strange dream: a dream calling him outside the tradition as he knew it.

So, he goes to Cornelius' house, and upon his arrival, Peter says, "You [sic] know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." Seems that Peter has learned his lesson. God has laid the groundwork for this fortuitous meeting.

Now Peter, always a preacher, sees an opportunity, and starts sharing the good news of God's love for all people in Jesus Christ. He starts preaching the gospel message of God's inclusion and acceptance of all people through the resurrection of Jesus.

And while Peter is still speaking, the Holy Spirit falls upon all who hear the word. The Jewish believers who have come with Peter are astounded because the gift of the Holy Spirit is being poured out even on the Gentiles. Peter sees what's happening and recognizes it to be, like his dream and his whole rendezvous with Cornelius, from God. All cannot help but recognize the Spirit's outpouring. That is when Peter says, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" And he orders them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

It's out of order. It's not how Peter has done it before—according to tradition, the Holy Spirit is supposed to come *after* baptism. And these Gentiles are uninitiated, unprepared, even *unclean*.

But here is the Holy Spirit taking a fresh initiative where the fledgling church is perhaps timid to follow. Here is the Holy Spirit interrupting Peter's rhythm and plans. Here is the Holy Spirit going beyond the confines of established tradition, leaping forward into new territory where those first Christians might have been too afraid to tread.

The Holy Spirit has paved the way. Before Peter can offer any of the essential preparations. Before Cornelius and his family are baptized. Before giving a confession of faith. Before Sunday School or Confirmation or New Members Classes, before the preacher's even done with his sermon, the Holy Spirit falls upon all who hear the word.

Good thing they were not afraid. Peter's rhetorical questions makes the Holy Spirit's intention for the Gentiles that day abundantly clear: "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" No. No one can withhold the water. And so, all are baptized. All are welcomed. The Holy Spirit brings these two separate groups together into one fellowship of love. And all stay together for several days.

The movie-version would end with them riding off into the sunset together. But the real heroes in this story are not Peter and Cornelius. No, the real hero—or more properly the "she-ro"—in all this is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the gracious and prodding one, the one who sets up the encounter, who coordinates the meeting, and then bursts, indelicately, on the scene. A mix of Mary Poppins in her grace and love and Uncle Buck in his disruption and impropriety, the Holy Spirit is the star of this show.

Peter merely plays the supporting role with his pointed question, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

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Today is First Communion Sunday, and the heroes of our service today are not Isaac or Noah or Landon or Caleb or Abby. No, but they are playing supporting roles to the real shero today. The same heroine that was with Peter and Cornelius. The same Spirit that blessed the water at their baptism, claimed them as God's children, and named them forever with Christ's name. The same Spirit that is present among us and blesses the meal which we share in Christ's name.

This same Spirit that has taken fresh initiative in their lives, that has caused them to ask for and receive bread even before the church's official instruction. The Holy Spirit plays the starring role today.

And today, with their First Communion, like it did with those first-century baptisms, the church catches up. Some of these children have already received the bread under the Spirit's own initiative. The Holy Spirit has welcomed them to the table already. But now we, the church, having seen *clearly* that the gift of the Holy Spirit has been poured out even among these children—we answer the question, “Can we withhold the bread for communing these children of God who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” with a resounding no.

For today the Holy Spirit is leaping forward and inviting all of us to join together—old and young, prepared and unprepared—in Christ’s great and lasting feast of love.

Peter’s question, *“What should keep these people from receiving what God has already given?”* is not only for the church.

It’s also for each of us.

Because, as is the case for these and many children in the Communion line, the Holy Spirit frequently is ahead of us. Has gotten there first. Where is that for you? Where, in your life, is the Holy Spirit taking initiative, but you may be too timid to trod? Where, in our life together, is the Holy Spirit working out of order, out of the confines of what we know? Where is the Spirit leaping forward and bidding you—bidding all of us—to come and follow?

AMEN.