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I'LL HAVE WHAT THEY'RE HAVING

Sermon for Easter 6B-Acts 10:44-48

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There is a famous scene in the 1989 movie *When Harry Met Sally*. It would be improper here to detail the circumstances, but suffice to say that the Meg Ryan character apparently has a very good time while dining in a restaurant. When a waiter approaches a diner at another table to take her order, the woman nods at Meg Ryan and says, "I'll have what she's having."

I sincerely apologize if you think that's improper material for a sermon, but on the one hand all of life is material for theological reflection, and on the other hand, this scene makes a very good point that I want to share with you. That point is this: when folks are doing something that is obviously worth doing, other people can't help but want to join in.

In an age where it seems everyone is concerned with church growth, this is a point worth taking to heart. No matter what your worship style, there is nothing like doing something that is obviously worth doing for attracting new followers. This has been true since the beginning of the church.

You may have noticed that we have reading from the Book of Acts instead of the Old Testament during Easter Season. The Lectionary, which is our prescribed schedule of readings, does this every year between Easter and Pentecost, to show how Jesus' resurrection turned into the Gospel movement.

It's amazing when you think about it. Jesus started out with twelve followers. That number actually went down to zero at the crucifixion. But after the resurrection the Christian Gospel began to spread, and it kept on spreading. This sets Christianity apart from many other contemporary phenomena. Historically there were lots of other messianic movements at the time that died with their followers. What made Christianity different?

Well, the first answer to that question is obvious. We Christians believe that Jesus Christ really was the Son of God, and his life on earth was the centerpiece of God's own plan to redeem the universe. If God is God, nothing can stop what God intends.

But we also believe that for some unknown reason, God chooses to involve human beings in God's mission to redeem the universe. If human beings in the time of Acts had done what human beings so often do and ignored God's demonstration of power and God's invitation to something grand, the Christian movement might have faltered in first-century Palestine, and God would have had to try something else.

But the Christian movement did not falter in Palestine. Against all odds, and despite blatant and powerful opposition, this once-obscure Jewish sect became a world-wide force. How and why?

When human beings cooperate with the Holy Spirit, as Peter was doing in our passage from Acts today, the Spirit's power is released and there's no stopping it. Many in Peter's audience expected that the Spirit was the exclusive property of the formerly Jewish believers. But there was no stopping the Spirit once he/she/it was released. Even the Gentiles, the non-Jews, came under his/her/its power, so that people were "astounded."

Human nature being what it is, people are attracted by energy. The Holy Spirit had energized Peter, and people in his presence wanted that energy.

Now holy energy is manifest in different forms. Some forms are very obvious and exciting, like Peter's rhetoric. Some are more quiet and intriguing, like the evident serenity of a person of prayer. However it is manifest, holy energy has something compelling about it. Holy energy attracts people. Holy energy amongst the faithful makes observers say, "I want what they're having."

I heard a talk once by contemporary theologian N. T. Wright. He was talking about the early Christian church in the Roman Empire. He said that Roman culture embraced two conventions that Christians conspicuously rejected. One was the exposure of unwanted infants.

When someone had a baby that was not wanted, usually a girl, it was common practice to abandon the child in some deserted place, where predators would take care of the "problem." Christians, believing all human life sacred, would rescue such children and raise them as their own. The children, of course, grew up to be Christians themselves. Furthermore, the obvious compassion of the Christians in doing this attracted attention from outside. People thought, "I want what they're having" and joined up.

The second Roman practice was evacuating the cities in time of plague. The ancient world did not know as much as we do about contagion, but it was obvious that sickness spread like wildfire in densely populated areas, so when disease broke out, those who could fled to the countryside. The Christians stayed and nursed the sick. Many of those sick survived and became Christians themselves. Moreover, once again, observers were impressed and thought, "I want what they're having."

In my opinion, we don't have to do anything terribly exotic to be attractive to potential new members. We just have to do what Christians are supposed to do: love God and love our neighbors. If believing in Christ gives us comfort, peace and joy, let's let that show and not make it a secret that never leaves our private prayer time. If God's helping us through some great sadness, let's pass that help along once we are able. Let's pray that God's holy energy may flow through us. Let's do whatever we do, but do it as if we were doing it for Christ himself, in gratitude and love.

Let's be the people about whom others say, "I'll have what they're having."