

May 12, 2019
Acts 13:1-3; 14:8-18
4th Sunday of Easter
Baptism of Sophia Harder Kouay

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“The Calling and Sending of the Spirit of Jesus”

Good morning, friends. Today is a special day. This morning we are here to celebrate and bear witness to the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of Sophia Harder Kouay. It is fitting that the text that has just been read comes from the Acts of the Apostles, a very important book in our Anabaptist tradition. The early Anabaptists saw in this narrative several significant theological themes that have become, in a sense, foundational to our collective sense of what this thing called *faith* is and what this thing called *discipleship* is all about. The Acts of the Apostles has often been interpreted as a narrative history of the beginning of “the church,” but we must remember that for the early Anabaptists the very word “church,” not to mention “the church,” was itself a highly contested notion. “The church,” so the early Anabaptists maintained, was not an unambiguous good, its authority and power was not self-validating and self-authenticating, for the church, they argued, was responsible for so many of the great evils of the society in which they lived. In one sense “the church” was but a name for the accumulation of *wealth, possession, power, and oppression*. The church was not an institution to be celebrated; it was rather something to turn one’s back on, for the church, the early Anabaptists believed, had turned its back on the people, the poor and the oppressed of the earth, and in so doing the church itself had become unfaithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The early Anabaptists gathered together and turned to scripture to lodge their critique and their protest. They said, listen, we can read these scriptures together, we can sing new songs together, we can baptize one another, we can share in the fellowship of communion together, and we can do all of this *without* the ecclesial authority of priests, bishops, and popes and without guidance from “the tradition.” And we can do all of these things together not because we are particularly special, but because of the power and freedom of the Holy Spirit, which calls us out each by name, draws us together, and sends us out to bear witness to the truth that sets this world free.

They saw in the book of Acts a narrative history not of “the church,” but of the power and the work of the Holy Spirit. And in Acts the Holy Spirit gathers *ordinary people* together, not to hoard wealth but to share wealth. Acts chapter 4:32-37 is one critical text for Anabaptists. I want to read it to you because the early Anabaptists saw this text as foundational: “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. 33 With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace

was upon them all. 34 There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. 35 They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. 36 There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). 37 He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet."

And this, for Luke the author of the book of Acts, is the Spirit's doing, the Spirit's work. For Anabaptists, this text has had a revolutionary import – *against* the grain of a society that values private ownership of possessions coupled with the accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of a few, this text signals to the revolutionary communion-bearing and community-forming power of the Holy Spirit, who calls ordinary people into a new way of life together in which the abundance of the earth is shared among all so that everyone's need is met. How contrary this Spirit is to the spirit of our contemporary world, a world that exploits and preys on the poor to benefit the few!

This same Barnabas "the son of encouragement" appears again in our passage for today. The Holy Spirit speaks to Barnabas along with Saul who is later called Paul and says "Set apart" these two people for me "for the work to which I have called them." The community fasts and prays and lays hands on Barnabas and Paul and they are *driven out, they are sent* by the power of the Holy Spirit. Luke is clear in this passage, as he is elsewhere in Acts that to be called by the Holy Spirit is to be *sent out* by the power of Jesus himself and after the pattern of the life of Jesus. The Spirit is nothing other than the Spirit of Jesus of Nazareth, and to be moved by the Spirit, to be called by the Spirit, to be sent out by the Spirit, is to *follow after* Jesus himself. This is to be on the path of discipleship.

The future is unknown, the journey is unknown, but the promise of the gospel is that the Spirit *always present*, if we have ears to hear and eyes to see. And the Spirit, as the Spirit of Jesus, sends us out to live in the way of Jesus. Our passage this morning skips over the early verses in chapter 14 where we learn that the presence of Paul and Barnabas in the Jewish synagogue in Iconium had caused a massive conflict. Paul and Barnabas find themselves in Lystra because they were on the run with threats on their lives. These apostles (which literally means "those who are sent out") encounter conflict and they come to know what so many disciples have known and continue to know – you will be threatened with death for the sake of the gospel. For those who announce the gift of life and life *for all* God's children are always seen as a threat to the established order. So the disciples flee the threat and thwart the planned assassination on their lives and find themselves in Lystra where they encounter a man sitting who could not use his feet and who had never been able to walk. This scene is beautiful. Look at it again. Paul listens to the man sitting, he looks at him intently and seeing that the man had faith to be healed, Paul says "Stand to your feet." The man, as if joined to the strength of Paul's voice, gains strength in his limbs and leaps to his feet and begins to walk.

We see the life-giving, healing power of Jesus in this work of the Spirit. But others sense in it the presence of the gods and they mistake Barnabas and Paul for Zeus and Hermes, so they make preparations to offer sacrifice to them. Notice Barnabas and Paul do in response. They tear their clothes, expose their flesh, and announce their share in the human condition. “We are mortals just like you,” they say. The people of Lystra had confused the messengers of God, those called and sent out by the Spirit with the gods, with divine beings. To be called and sent by the Spirit is not to become God, nor is it to become like the gods. The Holy Spirit is not a power that we possess. The Spirit is not a possession of private ownership, something that we hold within us, something that we “have,” something that makes us set apart from all others, making us better than others, standing above all others with miraculous god-like powers. No, the Spirit is the gift of new liberating and healing life, life that is poured out on all flesh, indeed upon the whole earth.

But this means that the Spirit is not owned by “the church,” as the early Anabaptists knew well. The Spirit is that power that creates a *fellowship of mutual love in which all hierarchies are razed, torn down* (this is what we celebrate when we share communion with one another).

Now today, Sophia, you will be baptized with water. This is a symbol of the Spirit’s work in your life. As a congregation, we are here to bear witness to the Spirit’s work in your life, and for us that means that we are here to affirm you, to encourage you, to build you up in love as you continue on your life journey and as you begin this new journey of discipleship today. Baptism is not magic. It may be hard to believe but I am not a god and I have no special power from God; nor is this water magical, even while we remember that water is very precious, water is life. I should also say that after baptism you will not become a god. You will be wet, but you will not be Zeus. I hope that doesn’t disappoint you. You will remain just as you are, Sophia, beloved by God since the moment of your birth; the water is a symbol, an affirmation that you have been called and sent out by the living Spirit of Jesus to follow after the way of Jesus in the world, a way of healing, of love and justice, and grace and peace. And you have been called into the fellowship of believers – to offer your gifts in loving fellowship with these people, but not only these people, and to receive the gifts that these people may offer to you in love. Amen.