Message: "Spiritual Proof"

A young street person was skilled at stealing wallets. One day, they took something that looked like a wallet full of money only to discover, when they returned to their hiding place, it was a pocket version of the New Testament.

Angry, they threw it on the ground. Later that night, unable to sleep, they remembered the little book. They opened it and started to read. And they couldn't put it down.

They soon gave their heart to Jesus. God's Spirit changed the young person's life, shattering the barriers built around their heart. Now, they dedicate their life to sharing God's Word with those who live in despair, giving them hope.

What an amazing story of faith! There are many people who resonate with this story of salvation and grace. But, for some of us, maybe it's not relatable. Maybe it's too far outside our life experience. Consider this illustration….

Imagine getting a ticket to an incredibly exclusive gala. The dress code is strict black-tie, the security intense and the guest list has been vetted for months. People spent thousands of dollars preparing, buying the right clothes, practicing their etiquette and making sure their credentials are completely flawless. The insiders, the ones who belong, are filing past the velvet ropes, showing their passes and taking their rightful seats.

But just as the evening is getting underway, the owner of the venue walks out to the sidewalk. They bypass their own security guards. They walk right past the velvet ropes, out into the street and start inviting the people standing at the city bus stop. They point to individuals in casual clothes, total strangers across the street, and people who didn't even know there was a party happening, and they say, "Come on in."

The security guards start panicking. They run over with their clipboards, shouting, *"Wait! They aren't on the list! They didn't meet the dress code! They haven't gone through the screening process!"*

The owner simply turns, looks at the guards, and says, *"It's my house. If I invite them in, they are in."*

This is exactly the kind of divine disruption we find in today's narrative, Acts 10:44-48. It's actually the "punch line" to last week's narrative. For centuries, the religious elite have believed they hold exclusive VIP passes to God. They have the paperwork, the lineage, the dietary laws and the traditions. They know exactly who is "in" and who is "out." And the early church was following along, just as we do.

Then God walks right past the velvet ropes of human tradition and introduces the world to the undeniable proof of radical grace. Alleluia!

If you recall, Gentiles were considered "unclean" to the early traditional church. This means they were excluded from God's covenant. It didn't matter who vouched for them, how they lived, whether they had a passport or not, or their religious practice. They were outsiders.

Or so, some leaders and members thought.

Peter was in that camp. He had to receive a divine vision before he'd even step into Cornelius' house. And, once Peter got there, he promptly decided to give a sermon to lay out his case.

It's like having the family over for Thanksgiving dinner.
Before everyone can dig in, they patiently wait for a guest, who promptly gives a speech, listing everyone's faults and flaws. Not the best way to engage with people.

All too often we create a checklist for who is "in" and who is "out" with God. Thankfully, God skips our bureaucratic process and provides undeniable spiritual proof.

Let's look at how this unfolds: "*While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word"* (Acts 10:45).

The Holy Spirit interrupted Peter's speech! God said, enough is enough. Here's proof of spiritual life and faith. God didn't require gilding of the lily. Nor did Cornelius or his household.

Spiritual proof begins when the Holy Spirit moves in someone's life to show God's purpose. The Holy Spirit refuses to be bound by human schedules or ritual. Think about it. Peter hadn't given an altar call, issued a membership card or conducted a class on the catechism. God accepted them anyway.

God's Spirit changes us, from the inside-out. It may not appear obvious at first, but over time, people who believe show their faith by how they act, and in what they say and do, and to whom. And people respond.

Years ago, a new believer got a job working at one of the "Big Box" stores. They found themselves on the night shift. The first few weeks on the job were eye-opening, as the crew was rough. The old TV program "Cops" was usually playing in the breakroom. Most of the crew identified with those being arrested, either knowing the person or sharing their thoughts through coarse or "blue" language. The rookie did their best to fit in, while quietly praying for their co-workers.

The rookie met with the boss three months later. And they asked, "Why did you hire me?" The boss replied, "Because of who you are. Have you listened in the breakroom lately?"

That night, the rookie did. And they realized things had changed. There were different shows on the TV. People sat and talked together, laughing and joking, playing games. The language, behavior and attitude of those gathered had changed.

This is how God's Spirit works. It can be subtle, but it is proof of spiritual life, even if people don't use churchy lingo. God's Spirit works through us to do good things for the people in our lives.

Are we willing to let God interrupt our neat, predictable religious expectations? Sometimes we're afraid to go outside the comfort zone of what we know and understand. That's what happened with Peter's companions. They were believers but saw faith in Christ from a traditional perspective.

Luke tells us their response, "*The circumcised believers... were astonished the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. They heard them speaking in other languages and praising God*" (v45).

The Greek tells us the traditionalists were literally "beside themselves" or "overcome" or "lost their senses" over what they saw and experienced. Their neat theological box for who could, and couldn't, be saved was completely shattered.

The proof wasn't vague. It was observable and spiritual. The Gentiles were praising God in different languages. And the whole household was filled with the exact same spiritual presence which came down on Pentecost. This was proof of God's blessing!

And God still provides spiritual proof today. Just ask Gerry or anyone here who's had an experience of God's presence. But this barrier-crossing narrative raises a question.

When God works through people who don't look like us, act like us, or share our background, does it make us rejoice, or does it catch us off guard?

Peter said, "*These people received the Holy Spirit just as we have. Surely no one can stop them from being baptized, can they*?" (v47).

In the traditional order, baptism comes first, then blessing. Here, God reverses it. God claims the believers first, leaving the church to simply catch up and validate what God has already done.

Peter realized there are no second-class citizens in the kin-dom of God. There is no "we" and "they." When God gives someone the VIP pass of the Spirit, the only job left for the church is to open the doors wide, baptize them, offer communion and pull up a chair so we can share together.

Friends, the ultimate proof of God's work is never found in a flawless religious pedigree, a political alignment, ethnocentric or economic status, a checklist or a resume. Spiritual proof is found in a transformed heart which praises God, moved by a Holy Spirit who refuses to show favorites.

Our living God is still walking out to the bus stops and the street corners of our world today, tearing down the velvet ropes we so carefully construct.

Our challenge as the church is simple: <u>stop standing in God's way</u>! Throw away the clipboards, step back from the door and celebrate the beautiful, disruptive, barrier-breaking grace of God. When we do, we'll have all the spiritual proof we need.

Let us joyfully sow seeds of faith so lives are drawn to God.
Let us pray …

Acts 10:44-48 (CEB)

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell on everyone who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. They heard them speaking in other languages and praising God. Peter asked, “These people have received the Holy Spirit just as we have. Surely no one can stop them from being baptized with water, can they?” He directed that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited Peter to stay for several days.