group Bible Study – April 18, 2007

Read Acts chapters 10-12

Reflection: Bob Zurinsky, Campus Ministries, bob@spu.edu

In many ways, the book of Acts is all about the Holy Spirit. And that’s a good thing, because the Spirit is the presence of God with us, now that Jesus is gone. This is exactly what Jesus promised before he left – that he would “send another” – that he would send the Spirit of God to the people. Without understanding the Spirit, we are in danger of missing out on what God is doing in the world today – hopefully through us!

The Holy Spirit is not a safe topic for discussion. Almost by definition, the Spirit is unpredictable and fresh, like a violent wind blowing through hearts and minds and families and communities (and the whole created world, really). The Spirit can’t be captured or pinned down – but I hope that we can learn to listen and obey. To know God’s Spirit is to know what God is doing in the world today. To have a relationship with God now is to be in touch with the Spirit that he has given us. And to really understand the Spirit is to open our eyes to the surprising ways that God’s Spirit breaks out of every box we’ve tried to create. This is why it’s dangerous to talk about the Spirit. But it’s also the most exciting thing in the world.

This quarter as we study the book of Acts, I invite you to throw away all of your preconceived ideas about what the “Holy Spirit” means. Maybe God is all about speaking in tongues and dancing in church, but God is also about galaxies colliding a billion miles from Earth – human hearts filled with fresh hope – a million species of life in the ocean dancing in perfect harmony – a prodigal son or daughter of God on their knees in repentance. All of this is the realm of the Spirit. Really, all of everything is the realm of the Spirit. Let’s know this Spirit.

In Acts chapter 10 we read about a strange encounter with the Spirit of God. A Gentile man named Cornelius has a vision. An angel comes to him and tells him to find Peter. He obeys; he sends his employees to go find this Peter and find out what he has to say.

At the same time, the Spirit is delivering another (even freakier) vision to Peter himself. Peter sees a giant sheet filled with gross animals being lowered down from heaven, and a voice tells him to kill the animals and eat them. “Never!” cries Peter – these animals were illegal. The Jewish religion, based on the laws that God gave to Moses, strictly forbade the people to eat these kinds of animals. And yet here was a new vision from God that was telling Peter to ignore those old rules and do a new thing. (Do you see the danger yet?)

The message that God was sending to Peter was this: the Gentiles were unclean before – you were not allowed to be in community with them – but that has changed. The Spirit of God is moving in a new way, and now even the unclean Gentiles are included. So when the men sent by Cornelius find Peter, Peter welcomes them and goes to the house of Cornelius. When he arrived, “he said to them, ‘You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with Gentiles or visit them. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean’” (Acts 10:28). In a single moment, Peter’s encounter with the fresh wind of God’s Spirit led him to turn his back on some of the most deeply held religious beliefs of his tradition. All because God was doing a new thing.

I want to know this Spirit; to embrace the all the ambiguity and danger that comes from “chasing the wind.” Because that’s where God is. Between the promises of the past and the kingdom of the future, the Spirit is the one “in whom we live and move and have our being” – and all we need to do is open our clenched fists and open our eyes to see what is really happening here.