

FOR ALL PEOPLE

Acts 11:1-18

First Presbyterian Church of Georgetown, Texas

Dr. Michael A. Roberts June 13, 2010

Acts 11:1-18

¹Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" ⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵"I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' ¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" ¹⁸When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

The gospel is for all people, all races, all nationalities. The gospel has no limits. The good news about Christ is for everyone.

Not all religious groups believe this. Take, for example, the so-called mystery religions. The mystery religions were one of Christianity's main rival in the first and second centuries. The mystery religions had secret initiation rites. They promised an assurance of a higher status and a closer relationship with the deity.

The contrast between private mystery religions that admitted their members on a highly selective and secretive basis and Christianity is clear. The initiation ceremony for Christians, baptism, was quite public and open to all. Christians were not a part of a secret "Members Only" community. God's invitation to respond to salvation in Jesus Christ was available to all persons. The gospel is for all people.

That's why the narrative in Acts 11 is an important one for the church. This story is actually told twice, originally in Acts 10 and now by Peter. Acts 11 is Peter's perspective on how he learned that the gospel of Jesus Christ is for all people.

We hear in this story how the gospel leaped across racial, class, and religious barriers in going from the Jewish to the Gentile population.

The church has been spreading out from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria. The Samaritans had received the gospel in Acts 8. Also in Acts 8, an Ethiopian who was either a Jew or a Jewish proselyte became the first Christian convert in Africa. Now, the jump is made to the Gentiles.

In Acts 10, we are introduced to Cornelius- a soldier, a God-fearer, a Gentile. He was not a Jew but one who sought after God. One day during the time of afternoon prayer he had a striking vision of an angel who told him that God had heard his prayers and was going to meet his spiritual yearnings. The angel told Cornelius to send people to Joppa to find the person who could help, one named Simon Peter.

It often takes visions and dreams for God's people to truly understand that the gospel has no limits, that it is for everyone. We find the apostle Peter praying on the roof during lunchtime. While there, he has this disturbing vision or dream. This is definitely a dream of guidance.

A huge white sheet comes out of the sky. The sheet gradually opens up and all kinds of animals are inside. Sounds a little spooky to me. *"Four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air"* the text says. This is unusual in itself but then a voice says *"Get up, Peter, kill and eat."*

We can imagine Peter going through the objections in his mind: "But, this is not what the law says. We don't eat these animals. I've never done this before. This is not what spiritual people do." He responds, by saying, *"By no means, Lord, for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth."* I imagine the voice thundering for emphasis *"what God has made clean, you must not call profane."* That is a message that needed to be thundered then but also through the centuries up to our time.

The dream or vision occurs three different times. Have you ever had a reoccurring dream? The same thing happens again and again. Perhaps the dream lifts up our deepest fears or our deepest hopes. In this case, the dream lifts up God's deepest desire. The gospel about Jesus is for everyone.

Peter struggles to figure out what all this means. "Does this mean I can eat pork now? What does this dream mean?" I don't know about you but I am not very good at figuring out what my dreams mean. My wife, Cindy, is great at interpreting my dreams. Some of us need help. In the Old Testament, both Joseph and Daniel are important interpreters of dreams. In this case, Cornelius' people were knocking at the door and help make sense of the vision. The Spirit informed Peter that he was to go with them.

Peter still doesn't know what all this means but he goes to Cornelius' house anyway. Cornelius tells Peter about the vision of the angel. Something miraculous happens as they converse.

Perhaps Peter shares his vision. At some point in their discussion, it dawns on them that God has sovereignly and strategically brought them together. And that God is about to do a new thing. For that time and place, a very new thing.

At some point in time, it clicked for Peter. The sheet thing was not about pork, it was about people. It was not about unclean animals, it was about unclean people- who God had declared clean.

For when Peter rises to speak in verse 34 of chapter 10, there is clarity. God inspires these words: *"I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."* The Greek literally says, "God is no respecter of persons." God has no favorites. No favorite people, no favorite races or classes, no favorite nations. God loves all people equally. God's attitude towards people is not determined by any external criteria: appearance, race, nationality, or class.

Having come to this profound realization, Peter then tells the story about Jesus. This telling in verses 37-41 is unique because of the emphasis on Jesus' earthly ministry. Peter concludes by saying that Jesus *"commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."*

While Peter is speaking, the Holy Spirit falls upon all of them. Peter asks "can we withhold water baptism to those who have been Spirit baptized?" This is just like the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. On that occasion, Jews from all nations had assembled, the Spirit came, the people spoke in foreign tongues, Peter preached, and the people were baptized. On this occasion in Acts 10, Gentiles are gathered, Peter preached, the Spirit came, the people spoke in tongues, and the people were baptized.

This was a Gentile Pentecost, just like the Jewish Pentecost. And that is the point- the gospel is for all, the Holy Spirit is poured out on everyone. Peter's insight of the impartiality of the gospel is confirmed in a dramatic way by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on all present.

This, as I've said, is an important narrative in the early church. This chapter marks a critical transition of the gospel to a Gentile population. It lifts up what becomes a controversial issue that will dominate the early decades of the church's life. This passage, though, in addition to its significance for the early church has a number of implications for the modern church. Let me briefly suggest four implications.

First, we are equal before Christ because our commitment to Christ is what matters most. Our salvation is dependent upon Christ. Galatians 3 says *"in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."*

Since our salvation is not dependent on what we do, or how much money we have, or what our heritage is; since our salvation, no matter who we are, is dependent on our faith in Christ alone, then we are equal before Christ.

Ultimately you see, anyone who is racist or sexist or class exclusive practices a salvation by works, that we are saved by what we do or who we are. The Christian church claims that everyone, everyone is saved the same way- by trust in Jesus Christ. If everyone is saved by Christ, then we are all one in Christ.

John Stott puts it well when he says: “We are equal, equal in our need for salvation, equal in our inability to earn or deserve it, and equal in the fact that God offers it to us freely in Christ”

When we say that Christ has abolished these distinctions, this doesn't mean that they don't exist, but that they no longer matter. They are still there but they no longer create any barriers to Christian fellowship. The differences may still persist but they are no longer relevant because of our single identity in Christ.

The reason we are equal in Christ is because our commitment to Christ is what matters most. For the Christian, our identity in Jesus Christ is the only identity that truly matters. More important than race, class, or gender. Paul insists on the prior and exclusive claims of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul imagines a community, the church, where the ultimate commitment to Christ binds us all together in a common fellowship, a unified body. We have equality in Christ because ultimately our identity is in Christ.

A second implication- since we are equal in Christ, the church is not to be limited to any special or elite group. Cults or sects often have this characteristic- they are reserved for the elite. There are today equivalents to the mystery religions. There are certain specific requirements of some groups beyond a profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. There are initiation procedures or ceremonies in some groups for the special few. Christianity, by contrast, is open and available to all people.

The church itself, of course, has also struggled with our own elitisms. People who have gone through certain processes or classes or experiences are perceived as more special than “regular” Christians. The church in the New Testament, you may recall, struggled with this. There were those who claimed a higher wisdom or special knowledge, which made them feel superior to others in the church. Paul vigorously confronts this form of elitism head on in the early chapters of 1 Corinthians. He sums up his argument with this critique *“knowledge puffs up, but love builds up”* (1 Cor. 8:1).

The gospel and the Christian faith are for all people. There should be no elitism, no special groups, no higher knowledge, no deeper wisdom, no hidden mysteries reserved for just a few. The good news about Jesus is for all people.

Another implication- since we are all equal in Christ, the church stands against all racial and religious discrimination. The primary emphasis of our stories in Acts 10 and 11 are that since God does not make distinctions in the new society of the church, we have no liberty to make them either. Yet, tragic as it is, the church has never fully learned the truth of equality of members in Christ. Even the apostle Peter himself, despite having this dramatic experience in Acts 11, had a bad lapse later on in Antioch, where he withdrew from the believing Gentiles and had to be publically confronted by the apostle Paul. This is described in Galatians 2:11-14. The issue was not completely resolved in Acts 11 and required a Council in Jerusalem, described in Acts 15, to settle the issue.

Commentator John Stott writes: “Even after that, the same ugly sin of discrimination has kept reappearing in the church in the form of racism, nationalism, social and cultural snobbery, and sexism. All such discrimination is inexcusable even in non-Christian society; in the Christian community it is both an obscenity (because it is offensive to human dignity and a blasphemy (because it is offensive to God who accepts without discrimination all who repent and believe). Like the apostle Peter, we have to learn that God does not show favoritism (Acts 10:34) (Acts of the Apostles p. 197).

It would be great if we didn’t have to emphasize this implication. But racism and religious discrimination are not dead. We live in a time where there are hate groups even in our own country that proclaim an exclusive, racist, anti-Semitic message and claim it is Christian truth. Particularly offensive to me are the groups which have the words “church” or “Christian” in their names.

Racism has no place in the Christian’s life or in the church. Our Presbyterian *Confession of 1967* states it clearly: “In (God’s) reconciling love, (God) overcomes the barriers between (people) and breaks down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference, real or imaginary. The church is called to bring all (people) to receive and uphold one another as persons in all relationships of life: in employment, housing, education, leisure, marriage, family, church, and the exercise of political rights. Therefore, the church labors for the abolition of all racial discrimination and ministers to those injured by it. Congregations, individuals, or groups of Christians who exclude, dominate, or patronize their fellowmen (and women), however subtly, resist the Spirit of God and bring contempt on the faith which they profess” (*Book of Confessions* 9.44). That strong statement is what we believe as Christians and Presbyterians.

It is tragic that we need to speak, but we do. The church needs to speak a prophetic word to all such groups. God loves all people equally. God has no favorites. The gospel is for all people.

We are equal before Christ because our commitment to Christ is what matters most. Since we are equal in Christ, the church is not to be limited to any special or elite group. Since we are all equal in Christ, the church stands against all racial and religious discrimination.

A final implication of this narrative is that the church is called to proclaim the gospel around the world. If the gospel is for all people, we can't keep it to ourselves. If the good news is truly good, we will want to share it with all people.

It is this belief, of course, that has provided the motivation for the mission of the church to the world. Jesus' commission to the church was clear: *"Go and make disciples of all nations."* The church has attempted to do this because we know that the gospel is for everyone. We can't keep it to ourselves. That would be a selfish response.

The "decision" by God (if one may call it that) to extend the good news concerning Jesus Christ to all human beings was nothing new, of course. Way back in Genesis 12, God told Abram: *"I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be blessing...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* And what would of happened if the Christian faith had remained one of several sects within first-century Judaism? Perhaps, like the Sadducees, Christians would not have survived the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Or if they had survived within Judaism after 70, several different scenarios can be imagined about how that competition would have played itself out. But such speculation is simply that, speculation, for the Holy Spirit willed otherwise. That is where our attention is directed by the text of Acts 11:1-18, to the work of God's Spirit! Adapted from (*Texts for Preaching* Year C p. 307).

The Holy Spirit's motivation was love for all the human beings for whom Christ died. The Spirit guided the church to break down barriers, to reach out to people never before considered to be God's people. The Spirit of God encouraged and pushed the church to reach out to everyone with the good news about Jesus Christ.

I began this morning by saying that the gospel is for all people. That's easy to say but not always easy to live out. The church has often failed to live up to God's call. As we read and respond to this narrative in Acts 11 this morning, we will want to resist all attempts to limit our mission, to confine the gospel to the spiritually elite, or narrow our focus to a certain group or people. Let me say it one more time- the good news of Jesus Christ is good news for all people.

"A MINUTE FROM THE PASTOR" 6/13/2010

This is my last Sunday before my summer break. I will be taking vacation time and two weeks of study leave. I will be leaving after the Session meeting Tuesday night and will be back in the office July 29. I will return to the pulpit on the first Sunday of August.

While I am away, church life will continue on in many ways. Our children will be gathering together for Vacation Bible School a week from now and Camp Blast is in August. Our youth will be participating in the Mission trip to Alabama this week and the Fun in the Son conference

at South Padre Island in July. Our Property folks will be making progress on the Windows restoration project in the Conference Room. The 219th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church will convene in Minneapolis on July 3rd. We will worship together every Sunday morning at 8:30 and 11:00. Our Organist, Monica Koenig, will be enjoying maternity leave. Our Music Director will get married! Philip Smith will marry Magen Comley on June 26 in Salado.

While I am gone, my two weeks of study leave will be focused on preparation and study for the sermons that I will preach in our worship in the fall.

After another full year of ministry, I am grateful that I will have vacation time with my wife, Cindy, my three kids, and for myself. We plan to take a few short trips around Texas. As always, I hope to see a few movies, read a few books and watch a few baseball games. Mostly, I want to rest and enjoy life at a more relaxed pace.

I know how fortunate I am to serve a congregation that recognizes that pastors need a break, and make the commitments to allow me the time to rest and reflect. I am grateful for your generosity and support.

When I return I will begin my 23rd year as your pastor. Thanks for the gift of this time away. And I do hope you have a good summer!