

Scripture Lesson: Acts 11:1-18

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 122

¹ Now the apostles and the brothers and sisters who were in Judea heard that the gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³ saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” ⁴ Then 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 near to me. ⁶ As I looked at it closely, I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷ I also heard a voice saying, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸ But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord, for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ ¹⁰ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹ At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹² The 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. ¹³ He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴ he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ ¹⁵ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷ If 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?” ¹⁸ When 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.”

Acts 11:1-18

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“What Leads to Life”

Rev. Amy Terhune

Douglas Deuel tells a story about a grandmother at a family gathering, who was coaxed into doing something she had never done before. After much friendly badgering, she climbed slowly up on an exercise bike. She took her time getting in just the right position. She waited a few moments. Then, nervously, she said, “All right, you can turn it on now.”

If only work in the church could be handled like that. If we could magically flip a switch, and then watch as the work is done for us. But work in the church requires a delicate blend of divine inspiration and human perspiration. [2 ¶s from “God’s Vision For The Church” by Douglas J. Deuel, www.Sermons.com.]

“Who was I, that I could hinder God?” Peter wants to know. When asked to explain why a good Jew would go and eat food that is not kosher with gentiles who are not circumcised and therefore, not members of God’s chosen people, Peter explains with a question. “Who was I, that I could hinder God?” That’s the crux of his defense. God was moving and Peter was invited to be part of it. Who was I, that I could hinder God? Peter knew the place he wanted to be was in God’s plan.

Now keep in mind that Peter was a good Jew, and even though the Jews were a relatively small population in the ancient world, they maintained their identity by maintaining their ‘separateness’. They were God’s ‘chosen’ people. They were different from all those other groups around them. I wonder sometimes if modern audiences can appreciate just how extraordinary that was. Surrounded on all sides by those who believed in multiple gods—and at times overpowered and dominated politically by those who believed in multiple gods—the Jewish people survived the centuries believing in one God who

ordered both the depths of the sea and the limits of space. But even more, they believed in one God who didn't merely use them or manipulate them, but who actively and unequivocally loved them; covenanted with them. We take such worldviews for granted, but it was utterly unique at the time. They really were special—they had grasped the truth long before many other civilizations comprehended it. Everything they did—the way they lived, the customs they observed—were a testimony to the world around them that God was special, and that their relationship with that God was special. Now I'll be the first to admit that their separateness sometimes led them to commit unspeakable atrocities. But that strong sense of identity accounts for how the Jews *survived* unspeakable atrocities as well, and are still around to this very day. Christians owe them a profound debt, because while we do not follow dietary restrictions and other such customs, we have maintained our identity in the same fashion. Jesus didn't pull the concept out of thin air, he extracted it from the long and rich tradition out of which he came: By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. Love was now what would differentiate Christians from others.

Peter didn't get that the night Jesus said those words at the last supper. It would take him a while. It would take further revelation from God before he would understand that love isn't only what you do; love is who you are—with everyone. It would take him awhile to understand that being special doesn't have to be limiting or to cut off others. Love is universal, but it's also our identity as followers of the One who loves us. And it would take Peter awhile to understand that God was pushing the circle outward. But I've got to give him some credit. He learned. Peter, who had the nerve to pull his Lord aside and rebuke him at one point, had since learned his place in the scheme of things. God calls the shots. God puts the plan in motion. Peter follows. "If 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?"

But what if the question was turned to us? Who are we, that we could hinder God? Who indeed? What is fascinating about the question is the answer we give. You see, God works through us. Human beings are God's means of accomplishing God's purposes. There's no magic switch. We're the ones who choose to peddle or not peddle. We're the ones presented with a vision, and we can respond or not. So every day, in a myriad of ways, we both help and hinder God.

Who are we? Independent, thinking people with a choice to make—that's who? I wonder sometimes if Christians recognize the power we have—power to choose, to act, to live out God's vision for our world. Our lesson this morning is God's vision for our world. Every year, on Holy Thursday, we read these words of Jesus from the gospel of John, spoken the evening before he's crucified – the very evening he is betrayed: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." The truth is, nothing about that is new. But here's my question: does Jesus really think that giving us a new commandment will fix things? A commandment is a law, isn't it? And a law can only go so far. It may rule our behavior, but it change our inward character. That's why they always say that one can't legislate morality. Yet Jesus has the gumption to give us a commandment – a law – that we love one another!!

"Did you catch it?" asks Rev. Richard Daggett. "A law telling us, no, commanding us to love. This law invades the very depths of our beings; this law presumes to have jurisdiction over the way we think, the way we feel, over our opinions, our prejudices and biases, our concepts of superiority, over the way every fiber of our being, both inward and outward, responds to the world around us." Peter understood that in our lesson today from Acts. Daggett goes on to say: "This law clarifies to us that while religion and law may exercise lordship over our actions, over the way we live, Christ wants lordship over everything we are. It is the law of the Spirit and not simply the letter.

"And to whom does this *new* law apply? To us. [2 ¶s adapted from Brett Blair, www.Sermons.com. Richard Dagget statements adapted from Minister's Manual, 1995, p. 188.]

"In April 1995, Edye Smith lost her two small sons, Chase and Colton, in the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City. Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, two men with a deep hatred

for the American government, set off a truck bomb that destroyed the front half of the federal building, including a day care center, and killed 169 people. Edye and her mother, Cathy Wilburn, were devastated by the loss of Chase and Colton. But hatred and suffering did not have the last word in this family's story.

“At the trial for Terry Nichols, Cathy Wilburn, grandmother of the murdered toddlers, noticed that Terry Nichols' mother and sister were alone in the courtroom, bearing the brunt of hatred from the victims and the public. And as a Christian, Cathy Wilburn knew what her responsibility was. So Cathy befriended Terry Nichols' mother and sister. In fact, she opened her home to them, offering hospitality to two women she could easily have hated. [from Stephen Arterburn, M.Ed., Paul Meier, M.D., Robert L. Wise, Ph.D., *Fear Less for Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2002), pp. 181-185. 2 ¶s cited in “YES!” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.] Cathy Wilburn knew she was supposed to be loving. And she made a choice not to hinder God, but to be part of God's reconciling love.

So allow me push the envelope a bit here. You see, I am convinced that it does not matter how many stewardship awards we win, or how many free community meals we serve, or how much we give to mission, or if our choir can knock our socks off when they sing. All of those things are true and they're fabulous. But if people do not experience the love of Jesus Christ when they walk through these doors, nothing else is up to snuff. And if each and every one of us does not do our very best to embody the love of Jesus Christ when we leave this place on Sunday noon, then we're not living out the call Christ places on our lives, are we? I'm not saying this to be harsh—I'm saying it to get us thinking.

I want to read you some words from a colleague of mine who is both younger and smarter than I am. Her name is Bri Desotell—she ministers out in Grand Rapids, and a few years back, in her blog *Grace with a side of Ducks*, she wrote, “Even though Peter had this glorious vision, even though, as he recounts in Jerusalem, “The Spirit told me not to make a distinction between them and us;” still he struggles to really figure out what it means for God to make *them* a part of *us*, to really invite the outsiders to come in and truly belong. Even though Paul was the great missionary to the Gentiles, who spoke long and loud about our salvation by grace and our oneness in Christ, he too succumbed to some of the old prejudices; though he gave lip service to the slaves and the women, some kinds of equality were just too radical even for him.

“We so easily fall back into those ways of thinking – it is so easy for our minds to slip back into the language of “us” and “them.”

“Some of it's quite silly: we tout our pride in being Methodists instead of Catholics or Presbyterians, even though we know that “we” serve the same Lord as “they” do. And some of it hits a bit closer to home: when those who champion gay and lesbian rights try to silence the voices of transgender men and women – when the hashtag #blacklivesmatter is hijacked by the hashtag #alllivesmatter to make white people more comfortable – when we criticize the choices made by people on welfare rather than listen to their voices and understand the very good reasons they have for the impossible decisions they face – when white, English speaking immigrants built the nation's greatness, but brown, Spanish-speaking ones are thieves and murders – when we have to acknowledge that, even today, Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours of the whole week – we can't help but confess: we proclaim one Lord... but still, given the choice, we'd rather be around people like *us*, and just let *them* do their own thing...

“That's why we need to keep proclaiming the message of grace. That's why we need to keep recalling us, again and again, to the truth: that we are one in Christ Jesus, that God is still speaking, and God is not a tame God, but the Spirit still surprises us by speaking a new word and doing a new thing... and like Peter, sometimes all we can say is, “I don't understand it; I didn't expect it; but I won't stand in God's way!” [4 ¶s adapted from “Them and Us” by Bri Desotell, <http://gracewithducks.tumblr.com/post/127479604223/them-and-us-acts-111-18-acts-sermon-series>.]

Now, some of that might feel inflammatory to you. Some of it might make us uncomfortable. Yet I'm increasingly convinced that my discomfort is not necessarily a reliable means of evaluating the

merits of idea. I am beginning to sense that God is calling me to discomfort, not because I need to figure out how to justify what I think, but because I need to think about what I try to justify. What does it mean to love someone I don't agree with; somebody whose whole philosophy of life seems antithetical to my own? How do I affirm our essential humanity, our connectedness to one another in the web of life? The only way I know is to not be afraid of others – of their stories, their language, their culture just because it's strange to me.

I'm reminded of an old Peanuts cartoon where Lucy and Charlie Brown are having an argument. Lucy threatens to 'knock his block off', and Charlie begins to run away.

"It's no use running!" cries Lucy. "I'll get you! I'll get you Charlie Brown! I'll knock your block off!"

All of the sudden, Charlie stops running. "Wait a minute!" he says. "We can't carry on like this! We have no right to act this way! The world is filled with problems. People hurting other people. People not understanding other people. Now if we, as children, can't solve what are relatively minor problems, how can we expect..."

POW!

Charlie begins to see stars and Lucy comments, to no one in particular, "I had to hit him quick...he was beginning to make sense!" [from *The Peanuts Treasury of Illustrations* on <http://people.cs.uchicago.edu/~dinoj/peanuts.html>.] Lucy represents in this case the classic image of someone who doesn't want to listen or have her thoughts challenged.

Like Lucy, perhaps Peter's critics in Jerusalem didn't want to be challenged. We can be reasonably certain that Peter wasn't exactly looking for it either. But when it came, he opened himself to God's leading. And when criticism came, he did not respond by attacking or getting defensive. "Peter does not seek to prove himself right or to prove his critics wrong. He simply bears witness to what God is doing, which makes Peter an example to us all..."

"... The Bible reports that when the critics heard Peter's explanation, 'they were silenced' (v. 18a). That's a certain symbol of victory, of course, when the opposition is silenced. Whether in sports, in politics, or just in an ordinary argument, when one can silence their opponent, they've won.

"Except that's not how God wins in the end. The entire episode ends on a happier, superior note. It does not end with critics who are silenced, embarrassed, or put to shame. Rather, we read that 'they praised God, saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life!'" (v. 18b).

"This is the sign and a symbol of God's victory: not silence, but praise. For God's end-game with human beings, always and always, is not defeat but conversion. And by the end of this entire episode, we have seen three beautiful conversions: Peter's, the Gentiles', and the critics'. [4 ¶s from "Look Who's Talking" by David J. Kalas, www.Sermons.com.]

God is moving in our world. God moves in us and through us. And sometimes, God moves around us and in spite of us. Regardless of how the media plays it, God is moving beyond what divides us, and God calls us to follow. And so the ministry of the church begins right here, with the person sitting next to us in the pew. It begins with compassion, trust, and grace for one another. If we can't love the people here, how can we hope to do it out there? Because while the ministry of the church begins right in own pew, it doesn't end here. It moves out from here. In ways we don't expect, to people towards whom we don't naturally gravitate, with a timing we might not choose, but that's life. And life – full life, meaningful life, abundant life – that's what we're about. Thanks be to God. Amen!