

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 close 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 to me, ‘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.”

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Slide #28

Acts 11:1-18

04/19/2026 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

Sermon Series, Part I: Disciples of Jesus, Empowered by the Spirit

Rev. Amy Terhune

For some thirty years or more, the mission of the United Methodist Church has been **[Slide #29]** to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Many of you can say that with me. Building on the efforts of my predecessors, we’ve worked hard to drum that particular phrase into you all, and I’m grateful you’ve taken it to heart. We’ve posted it around our building. Every decision we make, every action we take, every meeting we hold, we should be asking ourselves, “how does what we’re doing right now make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?” We’re not always as diligent about that as we should be, but our leadership has made genuine effort.

[Slide #30] When going through Creating a Culture of Renewal these past few years, the vision team that worked with me very conscientiously asked what it might look like to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of our little corner of the world in Saginaw, which is how it came to pass that we embraced the phrase “Loving the whole city, and loving the city whole.” Our ministry of discipleship and transformation focuses on love and wholeness – whole people, whole families, whole neighborhoods, wholistic health and wellness, a whole spectrum of opportunity – not that we’ll accomplish it in every way and place, but it helps us talk about the transformative work that matters here.

While we were doing that work locally, the United Methodist Church was engaging it, too. At General Conference in 2024, the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church were charged with the task of guiding the church to more effectively live that mission in all our wide variety of contexts, and so about a year ago, they released a vision statement designed to help the church live into the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. [Slide #31] I printed it at the top of your bulletin and it’s on the screen: *The United Methodist Church forms disciples of Jesus Christ who, empowered by the Holy Spirit, love boldly, serve joyfully, and lead courageously in local communities and worldwide connections.*

I’ll make a confession: my first thought was, “oh goody, something else to memorize. Something else to print and post around the building”. [Slide #32] My second thought, upon looking at the extensive array of materials they gave us, was, “Embracing an Adverbial Faith” – that’s our theme for the next five weeks. That’s our theme? Really? Adverbs? I’ll take ‘Fourth Grade Grammar’ for \$200, Alex. Adverbs – that’ll bring ‘em in in droves!

But maybe that really isn’t fair. Verbs are action words, and adverbs describe the action. Faith is about action – it doesn’t just stay in our heads. It’s lived experience. So, I actually appreciate the statement greatly. Love boldly, serve joyfully, lead courageously. For a long time, too many of us have loved tepidly, served begrudgingly, and lead timidly, if at all. Sometimes, I think that in the United Methodist Church, the greatest commandment is to love God and neighbor and never, ever, ever offend anyone. Period. So when the powers-that-be asked clergy to lead the charge in exploring what it really means to live our mission, I took the challenge. Adverbs! Let’s rock this!

So, we’re going to talk about adverbs...next week, and the week after that, and the week after that, too. Love Boldly. Serve Joyfully. Lead Courageously. It doesn’t take a genius to see where we’re going here. But this week, we’re going to start at the beginning: disciples of Jesus Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit. This sermon is interactive. In just a second, I’m going to give you a prompt, and have you turn and discuss it with someone nearby, preferably somebody you don’t know very well, if possible. Now, those of you who’ve been here a while, I want you to look around, and I want you to make sure that there’s nobody left alone without anyone to talk to – I’m counting on you to be bold and joyful and courageous and make sure everyone gets included. [Slide #33] You’ve got three minutes for each of you to formulate two sentences – two sentences that every Christian should be able to articulate – and share it with each other. Here they are:

I am a disciple of Jesus Christ because...

I live out my faith by...

In other words: Why? And How? Go! (Allow 3 minutes)

Okay, let's hear some answers...

[Slide #34] Most of us have chosen to follow Jesus because at some point along life's journey, he touched us, maybe impacted where we were going or the choices we were making. Jesus infused my life as a teenager – gave me an assurance and a sense of being part of something that mattered. Jesus saved me from my sin, to be sure, but also from my own sense of inadequacy and meaninglessness. Peter followed Jesus for much the same reason. Interestingly, scripture doesn't tell us what was going on inside Peter, only that Jesus called as he was fishing, promising to transform him into someone who fishes for people on God's behalf. Something about that call inspired Peter to leave his nets and his boat and join Jesus on the road. He took a risk; he left everything he had known behind. And when Christ was raised up, and Peter finally understood the difficult path Jesus had trod on behalf of humankind, he finally found his footing and his purpose. Jesus was his bedrock and foundation so that the church would be established and built on the faith one who not only believed in Jesus, but found the faith of Jesus.

In our lesson today, Peter recognizes the same movement at work in others. He does not leave behind the Jewish faith that has shaped him, but he is willing to leave behind sacred customs and identity markers that have defined him and his people for centuries. It's not that all the laws which make Judaism distinctive in the region lose meaning for Peter. Rather, Peter finds his being based in Christ Jesus – the living covenant. He has learned to recognize the call of God on his life, and he comes to understand that sharing the saving grace of Jesus Christ matters more to him than his own comfort or traditions. He takes the word to those who aren't Jewish, those who don't share his traditions, his language, his worldview. But they do share his experience of Jesus – as one touches and transforms hearts, minds, and lives. And when the Holy Spirit falls on them just as it did on the disciples at Pentecost, Peter recognizes God presence, God's movement, God's plan in action. "Who was I to hinder God?" he asks. God save us from being a hinderance to the mission of Jesus Christ in the world.

Years ago, when Jesus was sharing a meal with his disciples the night before he was crucified, he promised that he would send an advocate to be with them – someone that would give them power, inspiration, comfort, strength, and wisdom – someone who would bind them together with the Risen Lord throughout time and space. That someone is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit remains our source of power, inspiration, comfort, strength and wisdom. The Spirit continues to move within and among us. I'm going to put you to work again. Find another partner to talk to this time, but again, make sure no one is left out. [Slide #35] Three minutes for this question:

Where do you see and experience the Spirit at work today?

Let's hear some more answers...

[Slide #36] What I love about this passage from Acts 11 is that Peter doesn't seek to be right or to prove others wrong. He simply testifies to his lived experience. This is what I've seen God do, he tells others.

"... 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 disciples empowered by the Holy Spirit, the end game 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'. [3 ¶s adapted from "Look Who's Talking" by David J. Kalas, www.Sermons.com.]

If you pay careful attention to scripture, you'll notice that the 12 men who follow Jesus are called disciples in the gospels, but in Acts, they're called apostles. What's the difference? Disciples are followers, imitators of Jesus. Like Mary, they sit at Jesus' feet and learn. But apostles take that faith to go. They act. They become part of the movement. Every apostle is a disciple but not every disciple is an apostle. I alluded to that difference earlier when talking about Peter – maybe some of you caught it. Disciples put their faith IN Jesus, as all Christians must. But apostles learn to harness the faith OF Jesus. Oh great, more grammar – we've moved from adverbs to propositions – but it matters. Faith IN Jesus enables us to follow, but the faith OF Jesus empowers movement.

God is moving in our world. God moves in us and through us. And sometimes, God moves around us and in spite of us. God is moving beyond what divides us, and God calls us to follow, and not just to follow, but to love, serve, lead, MOVE. The ministry of the church begins right in our own pew, maybe with the people you spoke to today, but 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 living – living fully, living meaningfully, living abundantly (there's some more adverbs for you!) – that's what we're about. Thanks be to God. Amen!