

Fifth Sunday After Easter
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
18 May 2025

Acts 11:1-18

The reading from Acts of the Apostles today gives us one of the best descriptions of the power of prayer. Let us first review where we are. Last week in our sermon we said that our mission and vision for Saint Dunstan's are grounded in gratitude. Today we will see how they are also revealed in prayer. To reveal is to unveil, to show, to pull the blanket covering something and to show the object underneath. It is as if we are saying, "Do you want to know what undergirds our mission and vision? Do you want to know what the very foundation of our corporate life at Saint Dunstan's is? Well, let me reveal our secret. Our foundation is nothing else than prayer. Prayer to a benevolent God who loves the world, in and through his Son who saves the world, by the power of the Holy Spirit who renews and recreates the world and leads us to a life of sanctification. The very foundation of everything we do around here is prayer

In the passage from Acts today we see the clash of two mindsets or worldviews. The Judeans in the Mother Church of Jerusalem are upset that Peter baptized the entire household of Cornelius, a Gentile military official of the Roman Empire. This is the first apostolic outreach to the Gentiles. Their opposition is based on the fact that they believe the promises of the Messiah belong exclusively to the Jewish people. It was to them that the prophets promised a Messiah who would be a descendant of David. This Emmanuel of Isaiah, this Son of Man of Daniel, this promised Shepherd of Ezekiel... was to be God's gift for his chosen nation. He was to institute God's kingdom on earth, to lead the remnant to a new Jerusalem, to vindicate the suffering nation, and to liberate Israel from any and all oppressors. The Gentiles do not fit into these plans directly. They are not circumcised. They do not obey the food purity laws. They do not worship at the Temple. The promises are for the beloved people of God. What part do the Gentiles have in these promises?

Peter as a good Judean believes this. He is a true Israelite. He does not associate with evil doers, and he has never eaten anything that is not Kosher. He knows the Gentiles do not belong. They do not follow the covenants and the Law.

They are impure and Judeans should stay away from them. Yet, he chooses to go to Caesarea Maritima when Cornelius sends his people to Joppa to look for him. Now his own people in Jerusalem are calling him to task. Why would you do this? It is at this point that Peter shares with his peers a vision he had while in prayer.

He says, "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... I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven." In prayer, Peter receives a divine message. The inbreaking of God into the world through the Messiah forever destroys the wall of separation between the sacred and the profane. In Christ there is no longer any distinction between Judean and Gentile. Food laws can no longer create walls of separation between the disciples and the world outside their small circle. In Christ, there is no longer any room for hatred on the basis of ethnic differences or discrimination on the basis of religion.

Peter decides to go with the men, to preach to Cornelius' household, and to baptize all of them into "the Way". And as he did this, he saw the Holy Spirit acting in a powerful way among the new converts, to the point that he asked himself, "who am I that I could hinder God?" He most likely knew that he was taking a risk, and his church would oppose his actions, but he knew God was doing something powerful among the Gentiles. He knew he might become very unpopular with his church, but he saw himself as an instrument of God's love and concern for the Gentiles. This is the first time, according to Acts, that the door is open to the Gentiles to enter into the story of Israel. Peter acts like the proper Judean whose vocation is to bless the nations, in accordance with God's promise to Abraham, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.." (Genesis 12:3b).

This reaching out to the Gentiles, expanding the reach of the Church to the ends of the world, was the result of prayer. In prayer, Peter realized his true vocation to bring God to the nations and the nations to God. In prayer, he challenged his deeply held beliefs and realized what the true purpose of his life

was. Prayer realigned his priorities and allowed him to see strangers as brothers and sisters in Christ. No longer uncleansed, unrighteous, pagan strangers, but brothers and sisters in the Messiah. Prayer was the antidote to racism and discrimination. Prayer allowed him to remove the sheet that was covering his eyes to the Gentiles' true identity in Christ. Prayer gave him the courage to walk into what he perceived to be enemy territory to turn "the other" into one of "us", another member of the family, one who now belongs to his story.

Prayer is at the very core of what we do at Saint Dunstan's. Week after week, we gather in prayer to give thanks to God for our lives and the lives of our families and communities. We gather to commend those we love, and the whole world, to God's mercy and protection. We gather to vent our sorrow, to strengthen our faith, to ask for resolve to remain Christians in a progressively unchristian world, to remain civil in an uncivil world, to love the stranger in a world that teaches us every day to hate and discriminate against those who are not like us, to ask for protection in a dangerous world, and to grow in unity and the love of the Lord. We gather to pray in thanksgiving, petition, lament, and intercession because we know that God delights in our prayers. To pray is to ask God to do what God has already promised to do. It is to acknowledge that we have no power within ourselves to save ourselves. It is to acknowledge our humanity and our dependence on God. We need help to lead our lives, and this help can only come from God. This is why we pray.

Our mission and vision are centered on prayer and are revealed in prayer. All our meetings and meals begin with prayer, everything we do is centered on prayer, and it is for this reason that I ask you to continue to pray for us. We have an ambitious ministry strategy, and we need your support to make it a reality. Please join in what God is doing at Saint Dunstons.

May our Lord continue to bless you. Amen!