

“The Household of God”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
April 24, 2016

Acts 11: 1-18

Over the last couple of weeks, I have come to one undeniable fact about myself. I am now an old fart.

I have reached this conclusion after a series of recent experiences. The first came a week ago when my first-born child got her driver's license. As I sat in the BMV waiting for Erin to come back from her driving test, I couldn't help but ask, "Where did the time go?" When she came back and announced she had passed, we then went up to get her actual license. The BMV employee asked for my driver's license, as proof of residence and family relationship. When she handed it back to me, I looked at my license picture. "This was taken only five years ago," I said to myself. "I hardly had any gray hair then. Now look at me!"

The second experience came this past week as I was struggling with being sick. After a few days of on-again, off-again fever and congestion, I finally went to the doctor on Wednesday morning because I was over being sick. Over the course of an hour, I was seen by at least five different nurses, aides, or doctors. And I swear none of them were over the age of 30. Don't get me wrong: they were all bright and upbeat and very helpful. But as each new face appeared, seemingly younger than the last, I just felt my body getting older and older!

The third experience came last Sunday, when Tom Markey preached here at John Knox. Tom did a great job, and it's been wonderful to see his continued growth and development as he prepares for ministry after seminary. But it was earlier in that week that I felt like an old fart, when he sent us the outline for the 9am service. He proposed using two hymns that we had never sung before, and he proposed leading the prayers of the people in a way that we had never done before. I distinctly remember thinking to myself, "Why is he trying so much new stuff all at once?" And I struggled with what I should do as his supervisor: do I reign him in a bit and caution him against doing so much at once, or do I let him go for it, and whether it succeeds or fails, see how he can best learn from that experience.

After taking a deep breath and telling myself to calm down, I encouraged Tom to go ahead with his initial plans. And what happened? The two hymns we sang were beautiful and meaningful to the message he preached last Sunday. And he led the congregation in a popcorn prayer for the sharing of joys and concerns, and you all engaged in that prayer in a way that was enlivening and powerful. Old fart – right here!

I'm sure many of us have had these thoughts about ourselves at some point. Our bodies feel aged and worn down when we see others moving around with apparent ease and without pain. Our minds feel ancient as we remember how things once were, and how much things have changed around us. Our souls feel old when we struggle to know where our place is in this world. We tend to revert to order and rules, ways to reclaim some semblance of structure that reassures us that everything hasn't changed, and there is still something we can "count on." I'll admit, I've heard myself saying "No" to things more frequently than I once did.

How do we listen for God's Spirit amid the tensions of living in community as the household of God? How do we balance the importance of rules and tradition with the importance of fresh ideas and spontaneity? How do we all live – young and old, rich and poor, lifelong Christians and new believers – as children in the household of our living, loving God?

That was a key question the early church faced in the story we have read from Acts today. Do you remember how Tom left us with his message last Sunday? "Meanwhile, Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner" (Acts 9:43). Well, it was while Peter was staying in Joppa with Simon the tanner that he experienced a vision from God, as he was praying on Simon's roof. As one commentator puts it: Peter saw a sheet being lowered from heaven with a variety of creatures on it. He was told to "kill and eat." Peter refused because the food was "profane" and "unclean." Then he heard the crucial line, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (10:15). This cycle repeated three times, and then everything was taken up into heaven.

Peter's vision was followed by the arrival of three men from Caesarea who appeared at the door. Peter was instructed by the Spirit to go with them and not distinguish between "them and us" (11:12). When he arrived at Cornelius' house and preached, the Spirit led the Gentiles present to salvation. Peter concluded that God had given them the same gift God had given to Jewish believers (Joseph S. Harvard, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 452).

Why is this so important? Because up until this point, the early church felt that the only true way to salvation in Christ was through the Jewish ancestry. Peter himself had proclaimed this in the third chapter of Acts, when he preached at Solomon's Portico, saying: "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus" (3:13). The first apostles, who were based in Jerusalem, believed that the good news of Jesus Christ was meant primarily for the Jewish people.

And for the Jewish people, their identity as children of God had always been marked by how they kept and honored the Old Testament dietary laws. In the midst of an increasingly diverse, foreign culture, the Jewish people held to what was true and right in their religious identity by the food they ate. And so, the notion that Peter would eat food that was profane or unclean – or be directed by God to do so – would simply have been ludicrous.

That is, until Peter's dream in Joppa, his encounter with Cornelius and his household, and the Holy Spirit's presence on them and so many other Gentiles (10:44-48). And so, the church faced a crucial crossroads in its early life. Should it adhere to the past traditions of dietary law, or should it have faith in the word of Peter and his experience with the Holy Spirit? As you can see, to leave behind what was once considered sacred was not an easy thing to do. For at the core of those dietary laws was the essence of what it meant to be a child of God. Clearly, something had to give.

Perhaps the answer for Peter and the disciples was the vision of the Holy Spirit he saw and recounts to them in Jerusalem: "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. 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.' 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?" (11:15-17). Peter came to the conclusion, as did the apostles, that nothing can hinder the power of God. That is why they chose to "praise God" for this gift of the Spirit, for "God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life" (11:18).

And we should be thankful ourselves. Think about this: The apostles could have made a different choice that day. They could have determined that the Jewish dietary laws took precedence over any crazy dream of Peter's. They could have reaffirmed that Jesus was a Jew, and that God's message of resurrection hope was solely for the circumcised children of God. They would not have been out of line or judged to be "wrong."

And if they had chosen that course, Christianity may never have made it out of the Jewish traditions. It would have become a sect within Judaism, and remained something that never reached outside of its realm. And honestly, you and I would likely not be here today. Instead, you and I were blessed with the opportunity, as outsiders, to receive the gift of God's grace through the Spirit. "Who was I that I could hinder God?" (11:17)

Indeed, who are any of us – even us old farts – who can seek to hinder God's gift of grace.

We put on our sign out front each week the phrase, "You are welcome here." Seems to be a welcoming invitation to make visitors

and guests feel comfortable and encouraged to walk through the doors, right? And yet, think of that phrase in light of this Biblical mandate regarding the household of God.

If we truly believe and stand by our invitation that “you are welcome here,” then we are willing to open our arms to those who don’t look like us, who don’t talk like us, who aren’t educated like us, or don’t believe everything exactly the same as us. If we truly believe and stand by our invitation that “you are welcome here,” then we are willing to allow the Spirit to lead us in places that we otherwise might not go, so that God’s grace might be extended to others just as it has been extended to us outsiders. And who knows, perhaps if our neighbors see both English and Spanish on that sign out there, they realize that this is a place that is inviting and welcoming, no matter whether we are insiders or outsiders.

For in the household of God, whether we are old farts, young guns, or somewhere in-between, the Spirit has fallen on all of us equally and graciously. May we live out each day we are blessed upon this earth with that knowledge of faith, never seeking to hinder God, but only desiring to bring others to know the truth we have come to believe: Jesus Christ is Lord, now and always.

Thanks be to God. Amen.