

Sunday, May 15, 2022 – “Leaping Over Boundaries with the Holy Spirit”
– Bible Study & Reflection on Acts 11:1-18

Dear Members & Friends:

I invite you to read the following passage from Acts 11:1-18 (*The Message* by Eugene Peterson).

¹⁻³ The news traveled fast and in no time the leaders and friends back in Jerusalem heard about it—heard that the non-Jewish “outsiders” were now “in.” When Peter got back to Jerusalem, some of his old associates, concerned about circumcision, called him on the carpet: “What do you think you’re doing rubbing shoulders with that crowd, eating what is prohibited and ruining our good name?”

⁴⁻⁶ So Peter, starting from the beginning, laid it out for them step-by-step: “Recently I was in the town of Joppa praying. I fell into a trance and saw a vision: Something like a huge blanket, lowered by ropes at its four corners, came down out of heaven and settled on the ground in front of me. Milling around on the blanket were farm animals, wild animals, reptiles, birds—you name it, it was there. Fascinated, I took it all in.

⁷⁻¹⁰ “Then I heard a voice: ‘Go to it, Peter—kill and eat.’ I said, ‘Oh, no, God. I’ve never so much as tasted food that wasn’t kosher.’ The voice spoke again: ‘If God says it’s okay, it’s okay.’ This happened three times, and then the blanket was pulled back up into the sky.

¹¹⁻¹⁴ “Just then three men showed up at the house where I was staying, sent from Caesarea to get me. The Spirit told me to go with them, no questions asked. So I went with them, I and six friends, to the man who had sent for me. He told us how he had seen an angel right in his own house, real as his next-door neighbor, saying, ‘Send to Joppa and get Simon, the one they call Peter. He’ll tell you something that will save your life—in fact, you and everyone you care for.’

¹⁵⁻¹⁷ “So I started in, talking. Before I’d spoken half a dozen sentences, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as the Spirit did on us the first time. I remembered Jesus’ words: ‘John baptized with water; you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ So I ask you: If God gave the same exact gift to them as to us when we believed in the Messiah Jesus Christ, how could I object to God?”

¹⁸ Hearing it all laid out like that, they quieted down. And then, as it sank in, they started praising God. “It’s really happened! God has broken through to the other nations, opened them up to Life!”

For the Fifth Sunday of Easter, we have the conclusion of the story of Peter and Cornelius. This is one of the longest narratives of Acts. In fact, it’s one of the longest continuous narratives in the New Testament. And that fact tells us something of its importance. You may want to read Acts 10 & 11 so that you will fully appreciate its dramatic conclusion.

It’s a story that could be taken as encapsulating the grand theme of the Acts of the Apostles. In Acts 11:15, the apostles are surprised that “the Holy Spirit fell on them just as the Spirit did on us the first time.” Here’s a story of the gospel going forth to “all nations” (Acts 10:47), a mission that’s confirmed as coming from God by the gift of the Spirit. Can it be that God’s salvation, promised to Israel, has been extended to the Gentiles (non-Jewish people – that’s us!)? That is the astounding wonderful question at the heart of Acts.

We have in Acts 11:4-17 the cross-examination of Peter, but it’s also a trial of the gospel. Peter answers charges against him by telling each step that he has gone through with Cornelius, narrating each detail of the experience. Peter is on trial here, and he is careful to include details of his and Cornelius’ respective visions. He notes his observations of the sheet. Three times, Peter repeats that the sheet’s origin was “from heaven.” What Peter is being asked to do is so far beyond the range of his experience and his formation in the Jewish tradition that

only a repetition of the “kill and eat” as well as an explicit statement from heaven – “If God says it’s okay, it’s okay” – can enable Peter to see the point.

Four times in the Peter-Cornelius story is the vision retold (Acts 10:1-8, 22-23, 30-33); In Acts 11 is the first time that Peter himself tells it. Peter connects his meeting with Cornelius to his own vision of the sheet, and the Church gets a surprising first revelation of God’s design and purpose.

Peter’s narration of “Just then three men showed up. . . .,” at the door, who were “sent” (read commissioned) to get him, stresses Peter’s defense that everything that he has done is in response to the sole direction of the Holy Spirit. That Spirit tells Peter to go without reservations (Acts 11:12), though Peter takes along six brothers, perhaps indicating a sense of fear or anxiety at venturing so far out beyond the bounds of conventional expectation. That boundary-breaking, door-opening Holy Spirit is the engine that drives all these events.

Some have said that rather than “The Acts of the Apostles,” it ought to be called instead the “Acts of the Holy Spirit.” Acts beings with the Holy Spirit being given to the apostles and to that multicultural crowd gathered in Acts 2 at Pentecost. Now it appears that the Holy Spirit is even bestowed upon non-Jewish people (Gentiles) who worship God and do what is acceptable to God, leaping beyond the bounds of Israel. As Peter reasons, “So I ask you: If God gave the same exact gift to them as to us when we believed in the Messiah Jesus Christ, how could I object to God?” (Acts 11:17). The Holy Spirit’s work requires a new kind of reasoning on the part of the apostles. How much fun it is to watch the Early Church attempting to keep up with the surprising machinations of the Spirit. Are 21st century churches keeping up with the surprising work of the Holy Spirit?

The story we have before us this Sunday is a reminder that it’s God’s mission, not ours, to continue to reveal to us the surprising and inclusive reach of God’s love. The Holy Spirit drives the Church out beyond its comfort zone. In other words, the prophetic promise, uttered earlier in Luke’s first volume, Luke’s Gospel, is being fulfilled: “All humanity will see God’s salvation” (Luke 3:6).

Christ’s mission into the world consists of the Holy Spirit taking Christ’s good news over every human boundary. Part of the adventure of being a follower of the Way of Jesus is to be called by Christ to join him in his mission. We are, indeed, sent into all the world in Christ’s name to be part of his boundary-breaking mission.

I close with the opening verse of the hymn, “We Limit Not the Truth of God” by George Rawson. The lyrics are based on the parting words of Pastor John Robinson to the Pilgrims as they set sail for the New World in 1620. It is really a poetic prayer.

We limit not the truth of God to our poor reach of mind,
to notions of our day and place, crude, partial, and confined;
No, let a new and better hope within our hearts be stirred:
O God, grant yet more light and truth to break forth from your Word.

May that be our prayer as our church seeks the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Blessings!
Pastor Greg Rupright