

**Holy Spirit Acts:
“Who Gets To Go To The Picnic?”**

Acts 11:1-18

*Everyone can be included
in the celebration of God’s grace.*

A sermon preached by
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Have you ever felt like an outsider? Have you been left out, excluded, even ostracized because there was something about you that was different? You just didn't fit in.

I was sharing with the Wednesday Evening Prayer service this week about a fairly traumatic time in my life. When I was 14, beginning the eighth grade, we moved to a new town. We literally drove into town the night before school started and checked in to a hotel because we didn't have a place to live yet. The next day I showed up at school, not knowing a soul. I immediately became the target of the junior high bullies. A new kid in a small town, I stood out like a sore thumb. My mother had bought me a new outfit for school—nice shirt and shorts, perfectly acceptable where we came from. But the new school had a rule against wearing shorts. So there I was, with naked legs.

It was a rough start for a few days that seemed like weeks. The turning point came one day when I was "interviewed" by the cool kids. The leader of the pack was Robbie, the quarterback for the junior high football team. He and his minions cornered me in the boys' restroom and started asking me questions: Where did I come from? Why did we move to this town? What did my daddy do? How did I get a name like Bud? At the end of the interview, Robbie pronounced the verdict: "You know what, Bud? You're all right." We all filed out to class, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Somehow, I had passed the test. I was in.

Since that time, I have lived in 10 different towns. Whether you're 14 or 34 or 64, there is still some anxiety about coming in to a new environment. Will I be accepted? Will I be welcomed? Will I be let in? Will I be left out?

The work of the Holy Spirit is always the work of inclusion. The Holy Spirit builds the community of faith. God wants you in the family and will cross any barrier to bring you in.

The earliest disciples of Jesus had a fundamental decision to make. Who would be included in this new expression of faith? The original disciples were all Jews. Would this movement be a Jewish thing, or will it be open to others? Who's in? Who's out? What are the boundaries going to be? The Holy Spirit had something to say about that, and the word came to Peter.

Simon Peter was staying at a house in the seaport town of Joppa. The disciples of Jesus had been scattered from Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen, so he was basically hiding out. One day he went up on the roof while his lunch was being prepared, and he fell into a trance. In this dreamlike state, he saw a vision of food (of course). A big sheet, like the biggest picnic you ever saw, came down out of heaven. On this sheet were all kinds of animals that were forbidden for Jews to eat; this was not a *kosher* picnic. But a voice from heaven spoke and said, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.”

Peter was appalled. “No way,” he said. “I have never eaten any unclean food, and I never will!”

Then the voice spoke again and said, “What God has made pure, you must not call unclean.”

After this vision, Peter was immediately greeted by some visitors. They came all the way from Caesarea (about 30 miles) to get Peter and take him to Cornelius, a centurion in the Roman army, who was nevertheless a very spiritual man. Though not a Jew, he believed in God, prayed every day, and gave generously to local charities. An angel had instructed Cornelius to find Peter and bring him to Caesarea. Having just had the vision about unclean things, Peter consented to go along.

When he got to Cornelius’ house the next day, Peter reminded them that it was unlawful for a Jew to come inside, but because God had shown him that he shouldn’t call anything unclean, he would come in. Peter entered the house, and Cornelius told him his vision of the angel. Peter shared with Cornelius and his whole household the gospel of Jesus Christ. He told them about the life of Jesus. He told them about his death and resurrection. He told them that God had called the disciples to testify that Jesus was the Son of God who could forgive sins.

While Peter was still speaking to this Gentile group, the Holy Spirit came upon them. These unclean people were receiving the same Spirit the disciples had received on the day of Pentecost. The Jewish believers were astounded—even shocked. But there they were for all to see. So the people at Cornelius’ house were baptized, and the Christian mission to the Gentiles was on its way—under the leadership of Peter, who was

Jewish to the core and definitely out of his comfort zone with all of this. All he had wanted was lunch—now there was a revival going on!

What we have going on here is a dual conversion story. Cornelius and his family and friends are becoming followers of Jesus. They hear the gospel, are filled with the Holy Spirit, and are baptized into the faith. At the same time, Peter and his Jewish friends are being converted, too. Sometimes the religious people are the ones who need conversion the most.

One of my favorite Baptist preachers of years ago was the late Dr. Carlyle Marney, the gravelly-voiced pastor of Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C. Myers Park had started a ministry to the hungry and homeless in Charlotte, and that meant that some pretty unsavory characters could be found roaming the halls at various times. One day a matron of the church approached Dr. Marney and complained, “Why are you letting people like that into our church?”

Dr. Marney said, “I’m just trying to save some souls.”

“Oh, I see,” the woman replied. “I guess they do need salvation.”

Carlyle Marney shot back: “I wasn’t talking about them; I was talking about us!”

Peter and his Jewish friends are seeing a miracle take place before their eyes—Gentiles are hearing the word and responding. God is blessing them with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Maybe Jesus is bigger than Judaism; maybe Jesus is for the whole world. Eventually Peter reported to the other apostles in Jerusalem, who were skeptical about this outpouring of the Spirit. They heard this devout Jew say, “*If God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, then who am I? Could I stand in God’s way?*” *Once the apostles and other believers heard this, they calmed down. They praised God and concluded, ‘So then God has enabled Gentiles to change their hearts and lives so that they might have new life.’*”¹ This is huge, for the apostles and for the future of the church! Sometimes the church folk need conversion, too, so we can be faithful to what the Spirit is doing.

So what is the Holy Spirit doing? What is God up to, in the 1st century and in the 21st century? In some sense, God is up to what God has always been up to. Some things do not change.

The **MAN** is the same. The Christian faith is still centered on the person of Jesus Christ. The story of Jesus—his life, death, and resurrection—is the central story of human history. His teaching shows us the Way, the Truth, and the Life. There are many good religions and ethical philosophies in the history of the world, but the unique thing about Christianity is not a principle or a proposition. It's a person. We are saved through a personal relationship with the man Jesus.

The **MESSAGE** is the same. The apostolic proclamation given by Peter in the first century is still the core of our belief. Peter stood in the Gentile house of Cornelius and gave them the testimony of faith. You can hear in that testimony the elements in common with all the apostolic preaching. God anointed his son Jesus of Nazareth to do good and heal. He was crucified and rose again. The prophets of the Hebrew Bible all bear witness to him, and the disciples, who saw the risen Jesus alive, are sent to tell the world about him. All those who turn to Jesus in faith receive forgiveness of their sins and eternal life. It's what we still preach. The message doesn't change.

The third thing that doesn't change is the **MISSION**. We are called by God to go beyond our comfort zone to reach people for Jesus Christ. There are so many lost and broken and hurting people in our community as well as here in our church. Our mission at First UMC is, "When we believe, love, and obey God, lives, communities, and the world will be transformed." As followers of Jesus Christ, we must have a passion for outreach and transformation. A church with a passion for the lost is a church with a mission. A church without this passion is a poor imitation of a country club; it's already dead, no matter how many people are attending.

The man, the message, and the mission do not change. But if we want to reach the church, the community, and the world today, we will change our **METHODS**. We can't do Christianity the way we did it 50, 20, 10, or even 2 years ago and expect transformation to happen. You know the seven last

words of the church, don't you? "We have always done it this way."

Peter had a mission to share Jesus that called him beyond the comfort zone of his Jewish heritage into the world of the Gentiles. He stepped into the home of Cornelius and violated everything he had been taught since he was a child. But he remembered the voice in the vision: "*Never consider unclean what God has made pure.*"² The mission does not change, but the methods do as we reach out to people in different circumstances than our own.

Paul followed Peter's precedent in reaching out to the world of the Roman Empire. Paul was as Jewish as Peter was, yet his mission broke every boundary there was. In I Corinthians 9, Paul wrote, "*Although I'm free from all people, I make myself a slave to all people, to recruit more of them. I act like a Jew to the Jews, so I can recruit Jews. ... I act like I'm outside the Law to those who are outside the Law, ... I act weak to the weak, so I can recruit the weak. I have become all things to all people, so I could save some by all possible means.*"³

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, altered his methods of preaching and worship to reach the lost in his generation. Wesley went to the fields to preach in the open air; his brother Charles took the popular tunes being sung in the taverns and turned them into hymns. And England was converted. The coal miners, the poor, the broken, hurting, lost people that had been forgotten by the church were found for Jesus Christ.

Apply that principle for us today. In the 40 years I have been in the ministry, there have been incredible changes in the ways we do church: computers, the internet, contemporary worship, streaming video, websites. Forty years ago, we tried to figure out how to get more people to come to church. Now we say, "The church has left the building," and we try to figure out how to take the Gospel to the people. Sometimes it makes my head spin! On the other hand, I believe this is the most exciting time to be the church since the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago. The Holy Spirit is at work, and the work of the Holy Spirit is to include everyone in the household of Jesus. There are forces at work in the world today—evil forces—that would exclude

people because of their race, nationality, gender, sexuality, poverty or politics. But by the Holy Spirit, we each have a birthright to be fully in the family of God. Nobody can be excluded.

Henri Nouwen was a priest and a brilliant teacher at places like Harvard and Yale. Feeling led by God, he spent the last decade of his life living as a caregiver in a community of people with emotional, mental, and physical disabilities. It was an enormously healing time for him. In one of his later books, Nouwen tells a story about Trevor, a man with severe mental and emotional challenges who was sent to a psychiatric facility for evaluation. Nouwen wanted to see him, so he called the hospital to arrange a visit. When those in authority found out that Henri Nouwen was coming, they asked if they could have a lunch with him in the Golden Room, a special meeting room at the facility. They would also invite doctors and clergy people to the special luncheon. Nouwen agreed.

When he arrived, they took him to the Golden Room, but Trevor was nowhere to be seen. Troubled, Henri asked about Trevor's whereabouts. "Trevor cannot come to lunch," he was told. "Patients and staff are not allowed to have lunch together. Plus, no patient has ever had lunch in the Golden Room."

By nature, Henri was not a confrontational person. He was a meek man. But being guided by the Spirit, Nouwen knew that Trevor should be included. In fact, Trevor *had* to be there. So Henri turned to the person in authority and said, "The whole purpose of my coming was to have lunch with Trevor. If Trevor is not allowed to attend the lunch, I will not attend either."

The thought of missing an opportunity for lunch with Henri Nouwen was too much. They soon found a way for Trevor to attend. When they all gathered together, something interesting happened. At one point during the lunch, Trevor stood up and lifted his glass of Coca-Cola.

He spoke loudly, "A toast! I will now offer a toast."

Everybody in the room got nervous. What was he going to do?

Then Trevor, this deeply challenged man in a room full of Ph.D.s, started to sing, "If you're happy and you know it, raise your glass. If you're happy and you know it, raise your glass..."

Nobody was sure what to do. It was awkward. Here was this man with a level of challenge and brokenness they could not begin to understand, yet he was beaming. He was thrilled to be there. So they started to sing. Softly at first, and then louder and louder until doctors and clergymen and Henri Nouwen were all practically shouting, “If you're happy and you know it, raise your glass!”

Dr. Nouwen went on to give a talk at the luncheon, but the moment everybody remembered—the moment God spoke most clearly—was through the person they all would have said was the least likely person to speak for God—and who almost was not included.⁴

Are you happy today? Then a toast! Raise your glass and rejoice! You are invited to the picnic. We are all welcome here. You are surrounded by the acts of the Holy Spirit!

¹ Acts 11:17-18.

² Acts 10:15.

³ I Corinthians 9:19-23.

⁴ John Ortberg, in the sermon "Guide," PreachingToday.com.