

**“The Day Salvation Came to Our House”**  
**Acts 11:1-18**  
**First Presbyterian Church**  
**May 19, 2019**

**Introduction to the Reading**

One of the many things I value about you folks  
is that you listen well to scripture and sermons.  
Preachers tend to know these things...  
and I know you as a congregation of good listeners.  
But this morning I want you to take it up a level...  
to listen even more keenly... to a story that I think  
is one of the most important in all scripture.  
I should warn you, however,  
it’s a bit of a strange story; at least for Presbyterians.  
There are visions and trances and angels.  
The Holy Spirit works overtime to get everything done.  
So be forewarned – whatever is going on here  
defies easy explanation and is certainly beyond our control.

A bit of the backstory...  
well before the church was called “Christian”  
in the way we think of that word,  
it was a small sect of Judaism.  
In other words, the earliest Christians not only followed Jesus,  
but continued to observe the laws and practices and holy days  
that for centuries had marked the Jews  
as God’s chosen people.  
There were very specific guidelines  
about who you could associate with  
and especially who you could eat with.  
Under no circumstances would an observant Jew  
sit down at table with non-Jews.  
You remember Jesus was constantly being criticized  
for who he ate with.  
Though this may seem archaic to us NOW,  
we need to remember the purpose:  
this strict observance of the Law of Moses  
is what reinforced their identity as a distinct people...  
it’s what held the Jewish people together for centuries.  
Their dietary laws...  
their peculiar practices...  
their feasts and festivals...  
provided a bulwark against the pressure  
to water down their distinctiveness  
and become good citizens of whatever empire

ruled them at the time. .  
Will Willimon describes it this way:  
for the Jew “a little pork here,  
a pinch of incense to Caesar there,  
and it will not be long before the faith community  
will be politely obliterated.”<sup>1</sup>  
Well, in today’s passage, Peter has broken ranks  
and has done the unthinkable -  
he has entered a Gentile house and eaten with them.  
And when word of his transgression  
makes its way back to headquarters in Jerusalem,  
he’s called on the carpet.  
We pick up the story as he testifies to why he did it.

### Bible Reading

11 Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. <sup>2</sup> So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, <sup>3</sup> saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” <sup>4</sup> Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, <sup>5</sup> “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. <sup>6</sup> As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. <sup>7</sup> I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ <sup>8</sup> But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ <sup>9</sup> But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ <sup>10</sup> This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. <sup>11</sup> At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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; <sup>14</sup> he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ <sup>15</sup> And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. <sup>16</sup> 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.’ <sup>17</sup> 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?” <sup>18</sup> 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.”

### Sermon

Back in 1939, the *Christian Century* magazine  
began asking leading theologians to write essays  
describing how their mind had changed  
over the past decade.  
They were invited to reflect on what they had learned  
from their study and life experience,

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Willimon in his commentary on *Acts* in the Interpretation Series (JKP-1988), 96.

and then to articulate how they had once thought one way  
and now thought another way about matters of faith and life.  
I hope you have been pondering this question yourself...  
has your mind changed in any significant way  
over the past 10 or 20 or 50 years?

Perhaps like me  
you grew up thinking certain ways about people of color...  
or the roles of women and men  
in the home and society, the workplace and church...  
or having certain beliefs about sexuality and sexual practices...  
or having certain assumptions about people who are poor.  
Maybe your political mind has changed...  
maybe you've become more liberal or more conservative  
(or just more hopeless).  
Or perhaps your mind has changed  
about what's most important in life...  
about what qualities  
make for true beauty in another person...  
about who God is and what God wants.  
How has your mind changed over the years?

Well, taking a cue from my introduction  
and now having heard the story,  
you have no doubt deduced  
that the events described in Chapter 10 and 11 of Acts  
can only be called a SEA CHANGE of mind,  
both for Peter and for the fledgling church of Jesus.  
Because for them there was no issue more pressing  
than whether their newfound faith in Christ  
was meant for Jews only...  
or whether it was open to including others.  
You know the ultimate answer to that question, of course.  
The mere fact that you and I are here this morning  
is evidence that the Gentile outsiders  
were eventually grafted into the covenant community...  
which means that these events we read about in Acts 10 and 11  
tell the story of the day that salvation came to OUR house.

Here's how it happened.  
Cornelius was a Gentile living in Caesarea...  
he was a Roman army officer...  
and by Luke's account, he was a good and God-fearing man.  
One afternoon about three o'clock, Cornelius saw a vision.  
As clear as the nose on his face,  
he saw an angel coming toward him  
calling his name: "Cornelius."

“What is it, Lord?” he asked.  
The Lord answered:  
“Your prayers and your alms have ascended to God.  
Now, send down to Joppa  
for a certain Simon who is called Peter.  
He’s staying with another Simon,  
who is a tanner, who lives by the sea.”  
When the angel left, Cornelius did what he was told...  
he sent two slaves and one of his best soldiers  
to Joppa to fetch Peter.  
Meanwhile down in Joppa  
(about 35 miles south of Caesarea),  
Peter was praying on the roof of Simon the tanner’s house...  
and during his prayer he fell into a trance.  
While in the trance he saw a vision of a sheet  
being lowered from heaven  
with a variety of creatures on it.  
He was hungry and the voice told him to “kill and eat.”  
But Peter won’t do it  
because some of the creatures were “unclean.”  
Three times Peter was told to kill and eat...  
three times he objected on scriptural grounds  
until finally, Peter heard what I think  
is THE most crucial line in the entire passage:  
“What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”  
Well, when Peter came out of his trance,  
Cornelius’ men were knocking at Simon’s door.  
And still in the Spirit, the voice told Peter  
not to worry about the whole “us and them” thing  
and to go with them.  
So, he gathered six of his Jewish brothers  
and headed off to Joppa to meet Cornelius.  
When he arrived,  
Cornelius immediately told him about his vision  
and how an angel told him to send to Joppa  
to bring a man named Peter  
who would bring a message of salvation  
to his entire household.  
And that’s when it happened...  
something so unexpected Peter couldn’t have made it up.  
Just as he was about to share  
the good news of Jesus,  
the Holy Spirit fell on all of the Gentiles in the house.  
Exactly as the Spirit  
had first inspired Peter and his people at Pentecost,  
it now filled the Gentiles in Cornelius’ house.

Then Peter remembered how the Lord had said,  
    “John baptized with water,  
        but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”  
So, Peter invited all of them  
    to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ...  
and as Ch. 10 comes to a close,  
    we learn that he stayed with Cornelius and his family  
        for several more days.

Those last words in Chapter 10 become important  
    when Peter returns to Jerusalem  
        and finds himself on the hot seat.  
Word had spread to the “Mother Church”  
    that the Gentiles had accepted the word of God...  
        that was surprising enough...  
            yet that wasn’t what they were upset about.  
They were upset that Peter went into Cornelius’ home  
    and ate with him.  
Hard questions were asked of Peter...  
    criticisms and accusations were made against him.  
So, Peter told his story yet again.  
    step-by-step he tried to explain an experience  
        for which he had no other explanation but God.  
“What could I do? Peter asks his brothers.  
    “If God chose to give them the same gift we received  
        when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ,  
            who was I to hinder God?”  
And as another sign of the work of the Spirit –  
    those who at first condemned his actions  
        now accept his account.  
And as the significance of what had happened  
    began to sink in on Peter and his brothers,  
        they all said, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles  
            the repentance that leads to new life.”

Some folks refer to this as “Peter’s conversion experience,”  
    by which they mean that  
        he was clearly heading in one direction,  
            guided by one set of beliefs,  
                immersed in one set of practices,  
                    when God met him and changed his mind.  
Yet, I’m thinking it would be even more accurate  
    if they said this was Peter’s fourth or ninth  
        or sixteenth conversion...  
            because it sure seems he had more than one.  
Consider what we know about him:

- leaving everything at the beach to fish for people, Peter is converted.
- When Jesus asked his disciples who they think he is, Peter blurts out: “You are the Messiah,” and he is converted a little more.
- When no sooner have the words “I do not know him” left his lips, Jesus turns and looks at him and he, too, is turned.
- When he runs and finds an empty tomb, he is converted.
- When the Spirit rushes through that locked room and he preaches like he has never preached before, he is converted a little more.
- And now, as that same Spirit falls on those he just knew were outside of God’s love, he is converted one more time.

And here’s the point.

    This is the story of a believer’s conversion...  
         the conversion of one who was already converted...  
 and what this story does for us so many years later  
     is to bring the “C-word” right inside the church sanctuary...  
         even THIS church sanctuary...  
 where it sits down next to us in the pew...  
     and while we sing our hymns  
         and pray our prayers  
             and listen to our sermons,  
 it keeps poking us in the ribs asking:  
     “OK Christian, how is God trying to change your mind...  
         change your ways... change your life?”

I grew up in a tradition that tended to idolize  
     what we might call the “dramatic conversion” –  
 the gang leader who met Jesus  
     and now works on the streets...  
 the Wall Street tycoon who left it all  
     to serve the poor in a faraway land.  
 And I am still moved by stories  
     of how God changes people’s lives in dramatic ways.  
 And yet, I also know that there is a shadow side  
     to this emphasis on “conversion” -  
         it can create a false sense of security  
             and security, as we know, can lead to complacency:  
 It can lead us to say: “We’re saved!  
     We’re Christians... we’re done!”  
 Well, if Peter – the lead apostle,  
     the very rock upon whom Jesus would found his church –  
         if Peter required continuing conversion,  
             then who are we to rest on our laurels?  
 We are not done...  
     we are never done...  
 even if we consider baptism a once-in-a-lifetime experience,  
     what Martin Luther said applies here:

“Baptism,” Luther said,  
“is a once-in-a-lifetime experience  
that takes our whole life to complete.”<sup>2</sup>

Now, at this point in the sermon  
the temptation for me, the Preacher...  
the one that gets to stand in the pulpit...  
to tell you, the Listener...  
the one who gets to sit in those very comfortable pews...  
just how you need to be converted...  
how God wants to change your mind.

I could choose from any number of issues...  
as you know, there’s no lack of those...  
and I could suggest how I think  
God is trying to change your mind  
when the truth is I don’t know  
how God is trying to change your mind.

I only know that God is... always...  
trying to change our minds toward Christ...  
trying to bend our lives toward Christ.

So instead of that homiletical strategy,  
allow me to simply tell you  
what I want to carry away from this story and this sermon  
to be remembered and used this next week. OK?

To begin with I want to remember  
that God does, in fact, act in new ways.  
Or at least they seem new to us.

I think of the vision Peter sees during his trance...  
and the words he hears God say in his vision.

What he sees and hears goes against everything the Law says  
about what is clean and unclean. It’s new!

And I see that it’s because Peter believed it was GOD doing this...  
that he changed his mind...

that was able to set aside cherished scriptures and practices...  
literally generations of history and tradition...  
so that Gentiles might be included  
in the covenant community

I want to always remember that sometimes God acts in new ways.

The second thing I want to remember this week  
is that I need to be humble.

I haven’t used that particular word today,  
but this is really what we are talking about...

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony B. Robinson and Robert W. Wall in *Called to be Church: The Book of Acts for a New Day*, (Eerdmans-2006), 159.

and it's really something we need more of these days.  
Being humble enough to know I don't have all the answers...  
that my life experience is really very limited...  
that that my education only goes so far...  
that I am significantly influenced  
by what I read and who I listen to...  
that my thoughts and God's thoughts  
are not one and the same.  
Precisely because God acts in new ways –  
in ways I have not even dreamed of –  
I need to be alert, nimble, open, and willing to change.  
God was clearly not done with Peter,  
and neither is God done with you and me!  
When it comes to conversion, we're never done!  
I want to remember that this week.

And finally, I want to remember  
that as discombobulating and disorienting  
as changing my mind is...  
as uncomfortable as being continually converted is...  
in the end, this is very good news!

It really is very hopeful  
to know that we are continually being changed  
into the image of Christ.  
For this means that God is alive, not dead...  
that in our day, God is still at work:  
breaking down barriers...  
refusing to leave us to our cherished distinctions...  
disturbing our comfortable lives...  
making the unclean clean...  
bending everything in the direction of love.

This is what Peter learned in his trance...  
this is what is confirmed by his own eyes  
as the Holy Spirit falls on these outsiders...  
that love interprets law...  
love fulfills the law...  
and in the end, love trumps the law.

In Christ, everything has changed in the direction of love.  
No longer is there Jew or Greek,  
slave or free, male and female.<sup>3</sup>  
God makes no distinctions, and neither should we.  
For this is the day salvation came to our house.  
Let us rejoice and be glad in it!

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<sup>3</sup> Galatians 3:28