

Getting Out of the Way Acts 11:1-18

Fifth Sunday in Easter/ 15th May 2022

We can imagine Peter shaking in his sandals as he approaches the church council in Jerusalem. Now that he's back in town, he must give an account of his preaching and ministry throughout Judea. Word was spreading. Something new, different, disturbing, and unsettling had occurred. Peter was caught off guard by the Holy Spirit and the entire church with him.

The church assumed, you see, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, God's good news in Christ, was good news for God's people, to Jews, not to the *goyim*, the Gentiles. The God of Jesus Christ was the God of Abraham and Sarah. The Gentiles had their own gods and rituals, their own customs and traditions. Only Jews were considered "clean," while the Gentiles were considered "unclean." Therefore, from a Jewish perspective, the "circumcised" must never associate with the "uncircumcised," must never enter their homes, and absolutely must never share the intimacy of table fellowship and eat together—food that might be sacrificed to other gods, food that might be unclean (from a Jewish perspective). The lines were visibly demarcated. Expectations were obvious. There was no ambiguity. If you were Jewish, there was a built-in fear of crossing these lines, a kind of paranoia around becoming "unclean;" this fear was deeply embedded in the psyche or soul. To cross these lines, these strict boundaries, to not keep kosher, to violate these rules would be a betrayal of everything sacred and holy within Judaism, a betrayal of God's covenant with Israel and their covenantal identity as a people set apart, it would be a rejection of everything holy, throwing one into an existential crisis of cosmic proportions.

And now Peter must explain to the church leaders in Jerusalem, all Jews, how the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, the God of Abraham and Sarah, and the God of Jesus Christ appeared to be up to something new and unexpected. As they witnessed at Pentecost (Acts 2) in Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit has been unleashed upon the world, showing up in unlikely places and unlikely people. The Holy Spirit is shredding convention, devastating ethical codes, crossing boundaries, violating norms, tearing apart time-honored traditions—conventions established by God, ethical codes rooted in God's Law, violating norms established by history, tearing apart traditions and customs and practices ordained by God. It's all coming undone. Up is down, and down is up. Unclean is clean, and clean doesn't count for much anymore. Who's in, who's out – who knows? It's all blurred. The world has come off its axis. Everything is whirling out of control. Nothing is sure anymore. The foundations are shaking everywhere, and nothing is sure, firm, dependable, and normal anymore. Something is happening in the world that doesn't make any sense. Something confusing and scary and wonderful and amazing all at the same time—if we only accept it and not stand in the way of the Spirit's revolution.

I'm alluding, of course, to Peter's encounter with a Roman Centurion named Cornelius in Acts 10. Cornelius was a God-fearer, meaning a Gentile who worshipped the God of Israel but could never be welcomed into the temple or be fully included in the Jewish community. He would always be a man on the outside. One day he had a vision. An angel of God appeared and said, "Cornelius....your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now

send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter...(Acts 10:4-5). So Cornelius sent two of his slaves to find Peter. While they were on the way to Joppa, Peter was also on the way to Joppa. Since it was noon, he was getting hungry. Peter went up on the roof to pray and fell into trance, “He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’” But Peter said—repulsed and disgusted by the suggestion—“By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” Then the voice said to him, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” Three times this happened, and then everything was taken up to heaven. (See Acts 10:9-16).

Then, Peter, still confused and bewildered by this vision—can you imagine what that must have felt like for Peter as a good and faithful Jew? —the men sent by Cornelius appear and invite Peter to his home, the home of a Gentile. So Peter goes to the house of Cornelius and says, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (Acts 10:28). And so Peter began to preach the good news of Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentiles who heard the word. And we’re told, “the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles...” (Acts 10:45).

This is the story that Peter shares on his return to Jerusalem; we hear it a second time in Acts. Here now, in Acts 11, Peter “explains,” the text says, step-by-step, he slowly brings them through all that he experienced, so that they, too, may begin to see and experience the new thing God has unleashed in the world. Peter says to them, “If then God gave them, the uncircumcised, the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” (Acts 11:17). When they heard that, they were *silenced*. And then they began to praise God.

They were silenced.

And in that silence—and every time the work of the Spirit silences us—the church is born again and again, and the gospel comes to life! When we come to limits of rationality and sense, when all our protests, our appeals to tradition and convention and normalcy, cease, when we stop with the excuses and all the reasons why we think God can’t act in a certain way or act within certain people and welcome the Spirit—something new can happen; when we open up and embrace the movement of the Spirit. Or, better, the Spirit opens us up and allows us to embrace the new. The Spirit opens us up, breaks open our lives and enables us to receive something new and wondrous. Anything is possible. Peter, the one who was full of doubts and denial, has learned to trust the movement of the Spirit and embrace the seemingly impossible.

This is what makes this story so remarkable and fascinating. I believe that the radical transformation that Peter experienced, a transformation of himself, his image of God, his identity as a Jew, as a believer, as a follower of Christ, his ability to risk something new, to move against convention, open to the often transgressive work of the Spirit—all this occurred because the Spirit was working deeper than the defensive structures of his ego, working with a more

profound gracious power, enabling him to embrace God's future, to welcome the work of God, all of which he would never have considered possible or desirable if left to his own limited vision or understanding.

Luke tells this story about Peter—twice—in Acts because he wants us to witness how the Spirit breaks open a life, Peter's life, and shows how the Spirit works, breaking open a people's life, Israel's life, the church's life.¹ The drama must be told again in detail so that hearers—the church, you, and me—can begin to see their lives, our lives in it. The Spirit breaks open our lives, breaks open reality, changes our perspectives, deepens our understanding, and raises our conscious awareness to release us from everything that hinders us from participating in the future that God is opening for all people; the new thing that resurrection introduces into reality, into the depths of our lives; this new thing, this work of the Spirit that is tirelessly at work forging a people, forming a community in communion with the Living God and one another. And so, who are we to stand in the way of the Spirit's movement?

And yet, how often we do stand in the way of the Spirit, how often do we insist on our own way, arrogant in thinking we know what God can or cannot do, whom God can or cannot love, assuming that we know what the church is about and for and how to be the church. We love our traditions and customs and get stuck in our comfortable assessments of ourselves. We limit what is possible and prefer to stay in the practical, the reasonable realm. Maybe because change is scary and embracing something new can be fearful. We prefer the known to the unknown. But the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Risen Christ, is constantly *pushing us* forward into unknown, uncomfortable places, pushing us into God's future. This isn't easy for the Church.

We saw this and continue to see this in the Spirit's calls to dismantle the long painful history of racism within our hearts, within the church, and within the structures of our institutions. The Spirit is pushing us beyond convention, breaking down barriers, and changing our perspectives. There's still so much work for us to do.

I think back to when the Presbyterian Church (USA) was engaged in the debate over ordination for LBGTQ+ Christians, and how much focus and attention were given to the so-called "clobber" texts in the Bible, the ones that appear to condemn same-sex relationships. There was an appeal to traditions and norms. A turning point came for me in my struggles with scripture, tradition, convention, and my own experience of God's love and grace, when it dawned on me that maybe we can look for other passages in scripture for a biblical response to these issues. We could learn from Acts 10 and 11, from Peter's vision and his response; this story might be a better guide for the church. What happened in Joppa long ago can happen in any place, any time when the Spirit moves and transfigures what we think is profane, an abomination, and what we think is sacred. The Word of God can say something new; it can even press—remarkably—against what we previously heard from God in scripture. The Word of God pressing against the Word of God.² Did not Jesus say, "You have heard that it was said, . . . but I say to you. . ." (Matthew 5). This is not an excuse for any or every new thing that we think God is saying to us. We are called to discern.

The proof, they say, is in the pudding. How do we glimpse that new thing? If we remain open, what are we open for? How will we know the voice is from God? We will know it by its fruit. All that moves us toward life together, building, upbuilding lives into community, meaningful relationships, where barriers are removed, the excluded are welcome to the table, where the least of these are given a place of honor, and we witness life abundant—abundant in grace, mercy, justice, hope—and a deepening life in God that moves us to praise and adoration—all this is truly the voice, the new word from God. It’s the new word that speaks the community of Christ into being, a community that works together with a desire for shared life, shared hope, and shared redemption from death and all death’s agents—all this, too, is a new word from God. That’s what the Spirit is forming and reforming in us. This is our task, responsibility, calling, and joy—to join with the Spirit in the ongoing work of resurrection. And who are we to stand in the way of the Spirit?



¹ I’m grateful here for the insights of Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 115ff.

² Jennings, 118ff.