

**Scripture Acts 11:1-18 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition**

**11** Now the apostles and the brothers and sisters 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.”

As many of you may know, I am what some might characterize as a “late call” I was fortunate enough have a program called “alternative paths to ministry”, which saved me a boatload of finances and allowed me to take specific courses in seminary without the burden of 81 credit hours that an MDiv usually requires. And, the support of the church community was invaluable, aiding in my discernment – can at times feel lengthy, demanding, and stressful. Throughout the process, I was asked to lay bare much of who I am for the Church to examine, including telling my life story with honesty and transparency, and to include in that telling, not only my triumphs and the times I have felt closest to God, but also the parts of my story that are hardest to tell – the moments that inspire more embarrassment than pride; the setbacks, the failures, the mistakes, the painful periods, the parts I wish the most to hide. Essentially becoming vulnerable.

In that process, I spoke at length about my struggles with my holistic health. I discovered that most people who go into the ministry are wounded in some way. It is through the experience of sustaining and healing from those wounds that many are able to do such good ministry — to understand others, to meet them in their pain and joy, and to help them see God in all that they experience.

I couldn’t help but think of these moments as I prepared this for this morning. Today we read from the book of Acts, which tells the story of how that rag-tag group of disciples Jesus called together went out into the world, spread the Gospel, and built the church. It wasn’t an easy process, and just like during Jesus’ ministry, these new apostles...

- Messed up a lot.
- Missed the point.
- Tried stuff and realized it wasn’t right, or it couldn’t work.

And all around them, the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, Christ’s gift to the world, lingered and burned, pushed and pulled them to follow God in this new thing God was doing.

This particular passage concerns one of the main questions the early apostles grappled with – the inclusion and assimilation of non-Jewish persons into the Church. It was a complicated issue, I gather, and I don't pretend to understand all the specific cultural and religious elements at play when the Jesus movement considered if and how to bring Gentiles into the fold. I am, however, struck by this reading because I believe it has a lot to say about God's work and about the Holy Spirit.

Our story is about Peter – good intentioned, sweet, foolish Peter, who has been trying to figure out this Gentiles-joining-the-Church thing for a while. But God is tired of waiting around, and has, as God sometimes does, intervened by way of a dream. “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” – God repeats this rebuke three times to our favorite apostle, and it takes all three times for Peter to come around, and to understand that God isn't just talking about food, but people, too: the Gentiles, who some felt needed to become fully Jewish before joining the Church. Yes, this is a familiar three-times theme for Peter as well (denied Jesus, asked by Jesus if he loved him, and this).

Well, Peter finally gets the picture, though, and immediately puts his lesson into practice, teaching six non-Jewish individuals about Jesus and watching as the Holy Spirit descends upon them. He tells his listeners, “Who was I, that I could hinder God?” Who was he, with his rituals and rules, to define and limit the work and presence of the Holy Spirit? God desired to make God's self known – so God did.

So, what does this all have to do with brokenness, wounds, and ministry? Well, I found in my quest to be vulnerable, more shameful and difficult times in my life a similar assurance as Peter received in his mystical dream.

*What God has made clean, you must not call profane.*

Those things which cause us to struggle – those things that make us question our goodness and belovedness – those hard moments and periods that help us to form who we are – all these things that we consider most profane, most unclean, most clearly showing how broken we are, in Christ, are absolutely holy, clean, and redeemed. Indeed, God's spirit can live and work in them the same way God's spirit lives and works in our proudest accomplishments. Should God desire to make God's self known within us, God will do so. Who are we to hinder God?

John writes in Revelation “See, the home of God is among mortals...dwelling with them as their God; they will be his people, and God will be with them.”

Yes, the Holy Spirit desires to be with us and among us. God is within each of us in the places we find most terrifying, most shameful, most painful, most profane, and in the parts of ourselves the world rejects....

- In the mental illness, the assault, the addiction, the mistakes, the broken relationships.
- In our identities.
- In what makes us different from others.
- In what we hope to hide, the Holy Spirit is present already, healing and making holy space to do her work.

And in these places, God is both pervasive and persistent. Like in Peter’s dream, God will not give up until God has made God’s presence known. Of course, God’s Spirit is **not only** present in our own selves, but in all people and all communities. In my past community work, I’ve learned a lot about what it means to honor the work God is already doing in communities and places in need, and I believe what I’ve learned has a lot to do with Peter’s lesson as well.

In Acts, God tells Peter to recognize the inherent holiness of those not yet a part of the movement, and Peter learns to invite newcomers and outsiders in *as they are* – bringing what they have to join in the work of God.

I’ve witnessed and been a part of the ways in which faith communities, both succeeds and fails in partnering with our neighborhood and our local nonprofits by joining their work rather than dictating what needs to be done from our perspective. It is a difficult and subtle challenge to recognize and trust the Spirit’s work outside of our own self or our own context or institutions. So far, I have seen this work from our church in the Jamestown community...food pantry, accidental sisters, and more!

Candidly, the Church and other institutions of the world don't always have the best track record for recognizing and honoring God's presence in outsiders. Sometimes, we might believe that our rules and rituals are able to define where and how God's Spirit moves. But we have learned, again and again, that the Holy Spirit is acting through what we may call profane before we even recognize its presence there, The Holy Spirit was acting....

- Through women as pastors before they were ordained.
- Through same-sex relationships before they were marriages.
- Through people of many races before they were permitted into the leadership
- Through our lives and witness, even when we are devalued and ignored.

God has shown God's self in all these people through stories and challenges, dreams and testimonies. God has been making God's self known in them since God's spirit first dwelled on this earth.

Our challenge, then, is to follow in the footsteps of Peter. To call the parts of ourselves and the parts of our world that some consider unworthy or profane... holy, just as God does. To look for the work of the Spirit not only where we expect it but where we may otherwise ignore it. Because God will work and dwell in those places regardless of whether **we** recognize God's presence **in** them.

I will say this... if we do listen and watch for God's work in and around us, we have the great opportunity to join that work. To be with God. We, like Peter, can help build a community of diverse backgrounds and Spirit-filled people. We can come together in community as Christ's own people, and when we do, God promises, all will be made new. After all, who are we to hinder God?

Amen!