

Fifth Sunday of Easter – May 15, 2022

Acts 11:1-18

¹Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” ⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵“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. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The 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. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ ¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷If 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?” ¹⁸When 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.”

The reading from Acts is not the entire 11th chapter of the book.

But it is the entire 10th.

Or at least it captures the whole heart of the message of the 10th. As we quickly picked up on in the men’s group bible study a couple Fridays ago, all Peter is doing here is

giving the good folks in Jerusalem a half-length, Reader's Digest version -- if you will -- of his fateful encounter with the Roman centurion Cornelius.

Scripture is written ... differently than we expect today. It's not so much for the on-the-go, short-attention-span, easily distracted audience of the 21st century. Repetition ... has its place in some poetic sense, I suppose. Excellent for the birth-to-age-5 set, all the experts say, but boy, am I glad to have cleared that stage in parenting. One can only read "Are You My Mother?" and "The Runaway Bunny" so many times before madness sets in permanently, I'm afraid.

Simplicity is good! It's effective. There's a reason the Ten Commandments stick with folks. If Matthew and Luke could have coordinated a bit better, perhaps the Eight Beatitudes might have picked up a more similar "listicle" kind of popularity and we would be all the better for it in today's world.

But I am just as apt as anyone else to read along in the Good Book and roll my eyes (at least internally, if not literally) and think, OK, you just said that. Like a paragraph ago. Paul's letters are kind of notorious about this. The man could write the same thing three times ... but still have it be clear as mud.

I was a writer before I was a Bible reader and good gracious, I wish I could get some of these folks an editor. Your content could be great if you knew how to package it better, I'll think to myself. But wait, I guess that's a little bit what preaching is about.

Though a lot of preachers will confess they only really have a couple or few sermons. Nobody prepared me for the realization that we will stand up here in the pulpit and find we repeat ourselves ... a lot. I've seen people fall asleep from up here and I don't always blame you. Ten and fifteen years ago, you would have found me in a pew during the sermon, quite often, doing that most stereotypical of things: considering,

mentally compiling ... and writing and re-writing my grocery list.

A couple times a year a particularly engaging preacher might capture my attention from beginning to end. But I wouldn't need so much as a squirrel to distract me to drift. And it's not that I didn't glean some wonderful insights from sermons. It's just that, the way my mind works, especially when I was in a more contemporary worship setting, with say, a half-hour of praise music leading into a 45-minute-or-longer sermon, at all but my very, very best, I'd be apt to catch one particularly salient point, and go down all kinds of mental rabbit trails before dipping back in to pick up another and catch ... maybe a few good points by the end of the morning.

This is not a terribly efficient way of doing the walk of faith. But bless my ethnically-more-German-than-anything else heart, I have found that God is not always all that concerned with efficiency.

And there it is: an aspect of the character of God I know I have pointed to on multiple occasions. Inefficiency, because I guess when you have all the time in the world, when you hold it in the palm of your hand, you have time to be patient and to see the much bigger picture with all clarity.

But you and I *don't*. I am sure we all could devote a bit more of our time to being more patient but we never see the big picture like God does. We have to process what little we can of what we have been given and like young children, we only grasp so much and we have to play it on repeat.

Peter does this before the elders in Jerusalem. He recounts what strikes him as most important about his recent experience: his vision, his encounter with Cornelius and his men and his witnessing of the Holy Spirit. He is still processing this whole phenomenon as he relays it to those who question him about it. He is still just as stunned by it as anyone else. If God gave them the same gift, he says,

alluding to the idea that who really could have seen that coming(?) ... how could he stand in the way of it?

And then the church elders process what they have heard. At first there's stunned silence that probably made Peter's anxiety go through the roof. And then there's this sort-of-backhanded-compliment of a celebratory acceptance. God has given *even* to the Gentiles the insight and spirit-driven awakening of new life.

Uh huhhhh.

Just as Jesus could accept tax collectors and prostitutes and all sorts of other sinners, God could – as the wait staff at the Highway Twenty Roadhouse has surely gathered from our conversations at the breakfast table in recent months – accept the uncircumcised.

It's so very basic ... and I question myself for repeating the concept so often, but God is breaking down the walls we set up to separate, God is declaring irrelevant the distinctions that we make, the excuses we draw on for

excluding others and establishing that there is no limit on who God will love and accept and change for the better.

It's said that every time we draw a line as human beings to leave some other out, that God stands on the other side of that line. That is true and that is beautiful. But God is not limited. God also stands on the same side of the line as the line drawers in all their ignorance. God takes a side, and stands up for the poor, the oppressed, the wronged, the downtrodden, yes, and that is good and right. But God does not abandon the wrongdoer, either. God does not shut the door to repentance on the foolish and the powerfully fearful among us, who bring about great harm, whether intentionally or not.

A little grace goes a long way. We say and think cringy stuff, meaning well ... but we are in process, repeating the experiences of what we have seen, heard, read, felt, and in our humanity, we are not all that efficient at it and we produce a lot of clumsiness.

Be gentle to yourselves, beloved. Be gentle to others, too, particularly when you find it difficult. But be gentle first to yourself if you have any hope of extending that same grace beyond yourself.

And when you fail to do that, try again. And repeat as necessary. Amen.