

Acts 11:1-18

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"

Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "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. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.

At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. 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. 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; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.'

And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. 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.' 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?" 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."

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Our Acts

For any church hoping to grow, Acts is the book of the Bible to read. It tells what happened right after the first Easter, when the early church grew exponentially. It transformed from a frightened, cowering band of followers, hiding in an upper room, into a strong cadre of women and men, fearlessly telling what they had learned from Jesus: about peace and forgiveness, about strength and courage.

The Book of Acts comes fifth in the New Testament, right after the four gospels written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Gospel literally means "good news," so Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell the good news of how God acted through Jesus. The Acts of the Apostles then tells how -- even after Jesus died -- God *kept* acting, now through Jesus' friends -- plain old humans -- who came to be known as the

Apostles. How God can *keep* acting through plain old humans – through you and me –us, the latest iteration of the apostles, model 2013, sitting in these pews today.

What do we have to learn from the Book of Acts? How might *King's Chapel* grow from our small band into a group that can make a powerful difference for good in this our wonderful city, of Boston?

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In the Book of Acts, there are several main story lines. One is how Peter, the man who betrayed Jesus, grows to become the leader of the church. A second is the story of Paul, a Jewish rabbi bent on destroying the Christians, who becomes one of the church's strongest advocates, establishing many new churches across the Mediterranean. The third plot line is the one we read of today – the shocking turn of event - that God's special love is no longer just for God's chosen people, the Jews, but is for Gentiles, too.

Imagine what this deluge of events must have been like, all these reversals. *Maybe* it was exciting – thrilling – to be part of all this, to see God powerfully changing lives. But I also think it must have been overwhelming – the head spinning kinds of changes that happen so quickly, making us dizzy, constantly stretching us beyond our comfort zone, forcing us to trust people we have good reason to assume are our enemies, based on their past behavior.

Peter the betrayer who abandoned Jesus when he was most vulnerable; Paul the Christian-killer, who'd overseen the stoning to death of their friend and fellow disciple Stephen; and now, in today's lesson, Cornelius, the Roman Centurion soldier, of the same occupying imperial army who'd crucified Jesus. Three men who represented the *worst* that could be done to Jesus are suddenly now to be trusted? Are to even be our leaders?

Would your head be spinning, or would your rage be growing? Was this really what God wanted, or were we all being duped, fools because we fell for this vague "holy spirit" stuff to justify changes, to jettison traditions that had held our faith for generations! No wonder tensions were running high when Peter was called before his sisters and brothers, to justify what had happened with the Roman Centurion Cornelius.

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The scene in today's lesson is like a courtroom. Those gathered in Jerusalem are not pleased. They include others of the twelve original disciples, high level leaders who had closely followed Jesus. They've heard rumors that Gentiles – the non-Jews, unclean people who ate non-kosher food – had also accepted the word of God. They are so upset that they "criticize Peter," the bible says, demanding of their leader, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"

The stakes are high. For millennia, Jews had set themselves apart from others, as an act of devotion to God, by marking their men's bodies in a way that told everyone who was Jewish and who was not. To be circumcised was to be willing to be separate from all others, declaring an allegiance to God that could not be undone. In any conflict or war, they could not hide; their Judaism was declared right at birth, generation after generation, and the costs for them had been very high.

And if this was not enough, Jews every single day set themselves apart, fasting from certain foods, eating only what was kosher, not even sharing a table with non-Jews. And now Peter had wiped out all of those traditions – the things they had honored for centuries, the things they believed were dictated to them by God through Moses, rendering their sacrifices, their adherence to God's commandments insignificant.

Why? Why? Why had Peter eaten with Cornelius, the Roman soldier, in the soldier's home, of all places?

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Peter does not give a theological answer; instead, he tells a story. This is what happened, Peter says. I was in Joppa, a city on the Mediterranean coast, about 20 miles east of Jerusalem. It was noon, and I had gone out on the roof to pray. During my prayer time, I felt myself growing hungry, and then, in my mind's eye, I felt like I was seeing a picnic blanket being lowered to the ground right in front of me. God was urging me to eat.

I looked closely and saw that the food was impure, non-kosher, so I immediately affirmed to God that I wouldn't eat it, that I never have, but God kept urging me to eat, saying: "*What God has made clean, you must not make impure* – If I think it's all right, Peter, you shouldn't refuse it." This happened three times. Then it was as if the blanket were pulled back up to heaven.

I was completely confused by this, Peter continues. I had no idea what to make of it. And just then, I heard voices below, asking whether I was in the house. The men looking for me apparently had come down the Mediterranean coast 25 miles, from Caesarea. The Holy Spirit within me assured me to go with them without hesitation – "without hesitation" – because God had sent them. So what could I do?

I went downstairs, and told them I was Peter, What did they want of me? They said they had been sent by Cornelius, a God-fearing man, whom other Jews speak highly of: Cornelius prays and he gives alms, as we Jews do. The men told me that Cornelius had felt directed to send for me, while *he* was praying.

Still unsure what to make of all this, I invited the messengers in, Peter explained. Because it was late, I let them stay with me. It would have been cruel to force them to sleep outside, after their long journey. It seemed the safest approach, while I was trying to figure out what God seemed to want. All night I wondered,

tossing and turning. But the Spirit seemed to be telling me to go with them “without hesitation” –those clear words – so the next morning we all left for Caesarea.

I took 6 others of Jesus' followers from Joppa with me; I know we discern God's actions best as a group, talking it through, debating, and to be honest, I wasn't completely trusting my own prayer yet. The trip took two days, during which time we all kept pondering, talking more to Cornelius' men.

When we arrived at Cornelius' house, he told us that an angel had told him to call for me, because I would have a message for his whole house. Cornelius had trusted this enough to not only send his men down to get me, but also to go ahead and gather all his household together – it was teeming full of his children and grandchildren, cousins, aunts and uncles, and all the servants, whom he had called in from far and near, just to hear me. He'd taken a big risk, inviting me in, having no idea what I'd do or say.

So I began to speak to them, as I would speak to any of you, to any of our Jewish cousins, telling what I've known and experienced of God. And as I did, the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and his household, as surely as it had upon all of us. What does that mean? God seemed as much like a spark living within them as I see the spark of the divine within each of you. We're *all* a vessel of the Holy, somehow. If God gave them the same gift that he gave to us, who was I that I could hinder God?

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Peter stops his story. The criticism ceases. Silence fills the room. You can hear a pin drop. What could they say?

If God gave these non-Jews the same gift that God gave to the Jewish disciples, who were they to hinder God? So they praised God, amazed that God wanted to give the fullness of life to the Gentiles, too.

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Has God ever helped you change your mind about other people? Helped you get a new perspective, so that you could share what you had with someone you weren't sure deserved it, someone who probably could not fully appreciate it, who might not value your traditions, who might even set some of them aside?

How hard is it for any of us to break bread, to really share our own dinner table, with people different from ourselves! When did you last do that?

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It's only been 13 days since the Boston Marathon bombing. Each day there is more news, about victims who have had to make wrenching decisions about having a leg amputated, or living with a limb that will never respond. About city workers

rising early to scour bloodstains from our sidewalks. About restaurant workers soberly removing rotted food left behind in the panicked exodus after the bomb struck. We struggle to right ourselves in the aftermath of the bombing, but discover the layers of our trauma – not easily cleaned up and tucked out of sight in our psyches.

But for all these immense scenes of sorrow, we also continue to learn stories of unassuming men and women reaching out to help others. Veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan, themselves in wheelchairs, journeying here to be with new amputees, to assure them that life can go on – one suffering person reaching out to another, strangers becoming friends.

An MIT police officer, Sean Collier, laid to rest too early at age 26, but of whom already could be told countless stories of how he built bridges to untold numbers of strangers. To students at MIT, far from home and burdened with academic pressure, he offered a smile and warm welcome. To the homeless asking for money near campus, he offered help, treating them with dignity. He was a young man crossing divides who made a difference to many. In his eulogy, Sean's brother said, "Big smiles, big heart, big service, all love."

We also heard from the heartbroken family of a young Brown student, Sunil Tripathi, who begged us to be compassionate with one another. Sunil had been depressed, and went missing last month; cyber sleuths combing the photos of the Marathon detected a likeness between Sunil and the bombers, and soon vicious hate-filled messages crowded the facebook page his sorrowing family had erected in their effort to find him. When his body was found drowned, a boy who'd had nothing at all to do with the bombing, apologies were offered, but the hate had done its damage. His grieving parents said this: "Take care of one another. Be gentle, be compassionate. Be open to letting someone in when it is you who are faltering. Lend your hand. We need it. The world needs it."

Will we listen and learn? Can we hear the holy spirit alive in these stories, as surely as it was alive in Peter's, urging us to leave behind our divisions? To see the holy within every person? What God has made clean, we must not make impure.

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Last Sunday, after church, we gathered at the parish house to hear the annual reports from the chairs of our various committees. Denton Crews, chair of denominational affairs, and Ciael Hills, spoke of our need to learn more, not just about our denomination, but more broadly, about world faiths, so that we can build bridges, so that we can break bread together, all at the same table, rather than focus on the traditions that separate us.

Three short days later, on Wednesday this week, I discovered that that effort began already, with one young woman who started attending King's Chapel for our mid-week service about a month ago. Sarah's in her twenties, a paralegal, doing work in the offices nearby. On Tuesday night this week she took a cab home and the driver had asked her how she was doing after the Marathon bombings. He was asking all his passengers, he said. Sarah talked about those she knew affected, and added, at the end, that as a Christian, she was praying for all the Muslims in our country, sure that this was a time of great worry for them. The driver pulled over, startled; though Sarah had assumed he might be Hindu, he said he was Muslim, and confided the terror he and his family have been feeling again, as deep as after 9/11. He'd told his wife she might want to take off her hijab, the Muslim headscarf, if she felt that made her a target. Sarah told me, "Imagine how it would be if I thought I had to take off my cross to remain safe."

It's almost like the next step in the Book of Acts – when not only Jews share with Gentiles, but all faiths share with one another. What might our role be here at King's Chapel?

I wonder, who are the ostensibly "impure Gentiles" or enemies who could be leaders here? What is the interfaith work we'll do that would not just be study, but breaking bread with others, in our homes? How could we, like Sean Collier at MIT, reach out to those who are our neighbors and homeless? How could we invite in students strained by the stress of their studies or plagued by depression, and offer them not only our seasoned wisdom – which many of you do have – but also listen to them for the *insights* and values *they* could teach *us*, as Sarah has done?

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There's a theme that pervades all these stories: Sarah's and Denton's, the MIT officer Sean Collier's and the parents of Sunil, Peter's tale and Cornelius': it's a call for crossing boundaries with our hearts open. A call for compassion. A call to even be willing to let go of our determined grip on what is ours, what we find right and true and precious, our traditions. A call to imagine that we might have something worth sharing with others, *and* that they might have something worth sharing with us.

Opening up means risking the possibility of losing something, of having a tradition or something we hold dear change. Of finding out that we don't claim sole possession of the title "chosen people."

And another thing many of these stories have in common – they involve prayer, discernment, thinking and considering what it is that God may be calling us to do now. While Peter was *praying*, he was urged to open up and not hesitate to meet with those who'd come to seek him out. While Cornelius was *praying*, he gained the conviction to invite Peter into his home. Sarah and the cab driver crossed a divide when Sarah said she was *praying* for Muslims.

I know: To say “God told me to do this while I was praying” can be a handy excuse to justify what is best for me, to conveniently stamp God’s imprimatur on my own desires. Far worse, I could try to justify horrific actions as ordained by God – Christians have a dismal track record of doing just this.

But there *is* a different tenor to decisions that we as a church make – in an annual meeting like the one we’re about to have – or in our ongoing dealings on matters big or small – if we approach them not simply as a matter of business, but from the perspective of what a compassionate people would do; of what we think God yearns for, for the hurting people of this city; of what the Power of the Universe seeks in this city, at this time, alongside new sisters and brothers not yet even known to us, to keep spreading Good News. About Justice for all. About compassion that reaches across boundaries.

Some of you will call it the Holy Spirit at work. Others may become aware of new insights while in prayer or meditation, times of quiet when the rush of the world fades to the background. Your heart may be pried wide open when new people whom you’ve never met before begin to enter this place, like Sarah, or when they come to sit at your table, like Peter and Cornelius did. Undoubtedly, as for the early disciples in Jerusalem, all this may be disconcerting. We may complain, like they did.

But in the early church, when these things happened, then they *grew*. They *took off!* Over time this growing church built schools and hospitals, cared for the most vulnerable, sought justice and equality of all, and gave hope to the despairing, saying We will never give up on you. They kept growing, in those early days, because amazed people said, “Look at how they love others!”

It can happen again. Here and now. Listen with me, in the way you know best, our call as we face the future. And together we’ll write our next chapter – the Acts of King’s Chapel in the City of Boston. I can hardly wait.