

“Big”
Acts 11:1-18
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*And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them
just as it had upon us at the beginning. Acts 11:15*

Before the Scripture reading, let me say a word. The Book of Acts is a sequel to the Gospel of Luke and was written by the same author. The book begins with the final conversation between the resurrected Jesus and his apostles. His parting words to them have to do with the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit. This Sunday and next, we are going to look at the Lectionary passages from Acts in hope of discovering afresh the surprising things that can happen when the Spirit of God is on the move.

You might want to turn with me this morning in your pew Bibles to the reading in the eleventh chapter of the Book of Acts. We begin in the middle of a story. Simon Peter has been sent to bring a message of the Gospel to a Gentile, a Roman citizen named Cornelius. Cornelius and others were converted to Christianity and received the Holy Spirit and then were baptized. You would think that the home base of the Christian movement, the church in Jerusalem, would be excited about the inclusion of the Gentiles in the promises of God, but this was not the case. Simon Peter has to defend his actions with Cornelius and his household before the Jerusalem council. Here is the way he tells the story of what happened. Listen for God’s word.

Acts 11:1-18

You may have heard about the kindergarten teacher who one day gave her children permission to draw whatever their hearts desired. During the art exercise, the teacher walked around the room looking at what the children were drawing. She stopped beside one little girl who was working busily. “What are you drawing?” she asked.

"I'm drawing God," the child said.

The teacher said, "Nobody knows what God looks like, honey."

The little girl answered, "They will when I get through!"

When we read the Book of Acts, we realize how little clarity there was in the early days of the Christian movement about what God's love looked like and to whom it was directed. In the first century of the Christian movement, the big question was the question of boundaries. Where were the lines to be drawn that would determine who heard the Gospel and who would not? Who would receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit and who would not? Believers then, as believers today, assume that God's plan of redemption pretty much lines up with what WE would assume ought to be the boundaries, that God's biases and assumptions and our biases and assumptions are the same. Remember that in its infancy, Christianity was confined exclusively to a small, Jewish sect. The first great learning of the early church was that God had broader ideas in mind than even the most devout believer could imagine.

I think of the mother, as we get ready for Mother's Day, who was in the habit of asking her son every evening when he went to bed, "How big do you think God's love is?"

And every night, the child's arms would shoot up and out, his fingers pointing to the ends of the earth. "It's big, Mommy. It's really big." And so it is that God's love embraces all of creation and everyone in it and how challenging, even radical, that idea was and is. (1)

The Jerusalem church and particularly its leaders, were distressed to hear that Peter had gone to the Gentiles with the message of salvation, that he had actually sat down at a table and broken bread with them. In our minds, that might seem a bit overwrought, but to the mind of the orthodox, Peter had committed the ultimate sin, violating holy law. It's important to remember in an understanding and respectful way, that so many of the ritual laws and dietary restrictions that marked early Judaism were a function of the tribal context in which the Hebrew people lived. It was a difficult era; clans and tribes were constantly at war with one another, and it was essential that certain customs and rituals and rules be enforced in order to create and then reinforce group identity. Many of the dietary laws were written to give the Hebrew people that distinctive characteristic that set them apart and made them strong as a group. (2) When Peter had the dream in which all kinds of animals were

included in a sheet that came down from heaven, and the voice from heaven said that he was to eat these animals on the ritually unclean list, Simon Peter was astonished. The voice from heaven spoke again saying that what God has made clean he no longer had to call profane. At this moment, Peter's conversion to understanding the depth and breadth of God's love took place. He came to see that the God of Israel and indeed, the God of the Christian church, is a God who embraces, reaches out toward the whole world. He later described the stunning experiences he had had, first in Joppa and then in Caesarea to the Jerusalem church: "Men were sent from Caesarea, they arrived at our house, and the Spirit told me to go with them and to make no distinction."

I can just hear Simon Peter saying at the beginning, "Excuse me, Holy Spirit. Did you say Caesarea?"

"Yes," said the Spirit, "Caesarea."

In Caesarea, these were Gentiles. This was the capital of the Roman Empire in Judea. No good Jew or Christian would have anything to do with either the place or the people; yet, what Peter discovered was that God had already made a decision for the Gentiles. God had already included them in the plan of salvation. What a red letter day it was for the heretofore excluded Gentiles! And what a red letter day it was for Peter himself, who was given the gift of seeing the world, not through the lens of his traditional assumptions, but through the eyes of God. Peter discovered what we affirm in a hymn we sing: "For the love of God is broader than the measures of our minds. There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea. There's a kindness in God's justice, which is more than liberty." The love of God is much broader than the measures of our minds.

I don't know whether God has ever given you the gift of seeing things a new way, particularly in terms of who is the object of God's love and grace. Nothing is more impressive to me than to hear an older person say how his mind has changed over the years. I once thought - I was right about - but now I don't see it that way anymore.

I think of a woman I met when I was in training to be a chaplain at Georgia Baptist Hospital. She was a patient, quite ill. I walked into her room one day and told her that I was a minister and had come to see her. She told me she had no intention of ever having anything to do with a minister who was a woman. I said that we didn't have to talk about women who were ministers. What I wanted to talk about was how she was doing that day. (She'd had a very difficult surgery and was in the hospital for a long

time.) For over 30 years, she sent me Christmas cards thanking me for our friendship; the last card a few years ago, was a shakily written note saying how much my *ministry* had meant to her. She had once been so sure of one thing but came to understand that God had something else in mind.

Isn't it amazing to look at the history of the church and realize how people have been excluded from the circle of the communion of Christ or excluded from serving in ordained offices? Did you know that even in the twentieth century, people who were divorced were prohibited from serving as deacons or elders in the Presbyterian Church? One of the great works of the Holy Spirit is to open people's minds to new possibilities.

I think of God as being able to love everyone. When you think about a child, perhaps the second child who is born into a family, and the toddler is afraid that the little baby is going to take up all the mother's love or the father's love. But it turns out that love is not like that. It's not like water in a barrel. You ladle it out and there is no more. The more love that's needed, the more there is. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "Love has no end." God's love is inexhaustible and eternal and freely given to everyone who stands in need of mercy.

God's Spirit has been forever trying to show the human family a higher and better way, a way that is inclusive rather than exclusive. Never has it been more critical for people of faith to get that message out. I happened to see a friend of mine last week who is a rabbi. She is married to another rabbi. "How is Mario?" I asked.

She replied, "Well, he's fine I hope. He's in Israel right now. He's riding in a bike marathon with friends who are Palestian and friends who are Jordanian and friends who are Israelis. They are riding together to raise money for an environmental cause in the Middle East."

That's the message that needs to get out, the message that God loves and respects all people, even the people you might not ordinarily ride a bicycle with, God is saying – you are better together.

Peter was instructed by God to go to Caesarea and see this man named Cornelius at the same time Cornelius was being told that he should summon Peter to come see him. They would never have connected in a million years, were it not for the Spirit of the Living God, who wherever there are two, makes one, wherever there is hostility, builds peace. The most striking thing about this stunning experience that Simon Peter and Cornelius had is that when Simon Peter began to speak and to tell

the assembled people, Gentiles, that God shows no partiality, that as he began to speak, the Spirit fell upon the Gentiles, not AFTER the sermon but before the sermon, showing that God was ahead even of Simon Peter.

When he told the apostles back in Jerusalem about it, they were speechless. It took them awhile to get their minds around it, but then they did, praising God, they said, "Then God has given to the Gentiles, too, the repentance that leads to life."

What insight might we glean this morning from the story of the Spirit that blows where it will? At the very least, we can remember that God is constantly changing the mind of the church by expanding it. I am involved in our Presbytery with a group that supports emerging, immigrant groups. Do you know that in the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta and our two contiguous Presbyteries, Cherokee and Northeast Georgia, there are 15 ethnic churches and 38 immigrant group churches: Sudanese, Brazilian, Congolese, Vietnamese, Ghanaian, Ethiopian; etc. God is on the move creating an international church, not just across the seas, but here in Atlanta, Georgia.

For our world, the implications are strong that we need to be about understanding the other, whoever the other is, trying to sit down at the table and talk rather than be at war with one another, trying to be superior to one another. I do not know how much the world spent on military expenses in the year 2006, but I do know that the United States base military budget in 2006 was \$401.7 billion. There simply has to be a better way.

We must be open to the Spirit of the Living God who calls us always to less arrogance and to more openness, who's always saying: Don't look at people through the lenses of your prejudices. Put away that hate speech. Don't be taken in by stereotypes, any kind of stereotypes. If you are a Democrat, don't stereotype Republicans. If you are gay, don't stereotype straight people and vice versa. Christ is about tearing down dividing walls and enabling us to see one another as God sees us all, members of the human family. It is, after all, our Savior who gives us the spiritual power to overcome prejudice and exclusivism and to see the great beauty of the message of Jesus Christ that we are all creatures of the same God, whose mercy is wider than the measures of our minds.

What does God look like? We get some idea what God looks like when we come to the table where every seat is a seat of honor, a table to which all are invited, a table where the power to heal the world's sin of exclusion and hatred is released in two simple substances: bread and wine. (3)

I don't know what you need today. Maybe you are a person who is disdainful of other people. Maybe you are disgusted with yourself. God understands. The Spirit is here to heal you.

Maybe you are burdened by fear, by fear of people who are not like you. God understands. The Spirit is here to heal you.

You may have been wounded or bullied or rejected in your life. God understands. God is here to heal you. (4)

Don't let anybody ever tell you we don't know what God looks like. God looks like Christ's body, broken for you.

(1) Stephen V. Doughty, "Exploring God's Love for us," *Weavings*, January/February, 1998, p.37.

(2) Robert Cummings Neville, "The Light of the World," *The progressive Christian*, March/April, 2007, p.15.

(3) *Ibid.*, p. 17.

(4) *Ibid.*