

**Rev. Lisa Schrott**  
**May 15, 2022**  
**Acts 11: 11-18 *Them and Us***

In the church year we are in the season of Eastertide -the season between Easter and Pentecost. The scripture stories we share in this season reflect the call to be disciples of Christ and to spread the good news – that God gave us the incredible gift of his Son Jesus – his ministry on earth of teaching, preaching, healing, and welcoming all, as well as the gift of salvation by his death on the cross.

This morning we hear a passage from the book of the Acts. I want to give you a bit of context for this passage. In Acts chapter 9 we learn that Peter has left Jerusalem and has been traveling around the area sharing the good news of Jesus. He ends up in Joppa, about 40 miles northwest of Jerusalem, at the southern end of what today is Tel Aviv.

Eugene Peterson in *The Message*, shares what happens next this way.... About noon one day Peter went out on the balcony to pray. While praying Peter got hungry and started thinking about lunch. While lunch was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the skies open up. Something that looked like a huge blanket was lowered and settled on the ground. Every kind of animal and reptile and bird you could think of was on it. Then a voice came: “Go to it, Peter—kill and eat.”

Peter said, “Oh, no, Lord. I’ve never so much as tasted food that was not kosher.” The voice came a second time: “If God says it’s okay, it’s okay.” This happened three times, and then the blanket was pulled back up into the skies.

Peter was puzzled by this vision, but his ruminations were interrupted by three men who showed up at the house where Peter was staying and invited him to go to Caesarea to the home of a Roman Centurion named Cornelius, so Cornelius could hear what Peter had to say. Peter went and invited those present - non-Jewish gentiles to hear the Good News – the good news of the free gift of grace that fills us – fills us to overflowing in a world that says we have to fit a certain set of parameters to be loved.

Our text this morning retells this story from a slightly different perspective. It begins with Peter being called, so to speak, to the Principal’s office - he goes back to Jerusalem to meet with a council of church leaders who have heard what Peter has been up to and are criticizing him because he had been eating with those outside the Jewish faith. That was a no-no; a clear breaking of the dietary laws established in the Torah. Now Peter had some good company - Jesus also was accused of this by the religious leaders - eating with sinners and outcasts.

So Peter tells the council leaders the story of the vision he had – the blanket descending from heaven with all of the different kinds of food. And then he tells them what happened next when he goes to Caesarea to meet Cornelius, the Roman Centurion. Hear now these words from Acts chapter 11 beginning at verse 11:

Peter told them, “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." **This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

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"It seems that black holes like doughnuts." That was the quote of the day at the National Press Club on Thursday from Dr. Feryal Özel of the University of Arizona as she displayed what she called "the first direct image of the gentle giant in the center of our galaxy." – A black hole. The image showed a lumpy doughnut of radio emission framing empty space.

Dr. Özel is part of the Event Horizon Telescope project, a collaboration of more than 300 scientists from 13 institutions that operates global network of telescopes. While there has been much prior understanding of black holes from measurements of gravitational distortion, as Dennis Overbye, the New York Times author of the article states, "Seeing is believing." This was actually the second black hole the team had seen – in 2019, the same team captured an image of the black hole in the galaxy Messier 87, or M87. That image, the first ever taken of a black hole, is now enshrined in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. "We have seen what we thought was 'unseeable,'" Sheperd Doeleman, an astronomer at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, said at the time.<sup>1</sup>

I think Peter would have delighted in this. Seeing what is unseeable. That is what happened in his vision – he saw the unseeable - that every kind of animal and reptile and bird you could think of was on a blanket that descended from heaven, and Peter who proclaimed that he had never eaten food that was considered unclean, was told not to make a distinction and that he could eat any food, for it had all been created by God. And moreover that he could eat meals with "them" – the people who were "not us," the people considered unclean. Now because this news was as far out in the universe as "seeing a black hole, Peter's vision was repeated two more times.

And to make matters worse, Peter then accompanied three men to Caesarea. Caesarea was a town built by King Herod (yes – that King Herod). It was the Roman governmental center of Judea, home to Roman courts of law, as well as the headquarters for the Roman military forces that occupied Judea. Not really the kind of place you expect to find Peter just after Jesus' crucifixion. And yet here is Peter going off to share the good news of Jesus Christ to this non-Jewish community of gentiles; going to the house of a Roman Centurion.

Now in his vision, Peter saw the unseeable, but his counterparts in Jerusalem did not. And they call him back to explain himself – I can see them in my mind's eye, eye bulging, faces red,

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<sup>1</sup>Dennis Overbye. The Milky Way's Black Hole Comes to Light. The Event Horizon Telescope has once again caught sight of the "unseeable." *The New York Times*. May 12, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/12/science/black-hole-photo.html>

the proverbial head about to explode as they say to each other “What was he thinking? Going to Caesarea – to the home of a Roman Centurion – he knows better than that.”

So Peter goes back to Jerusalem and says, “The Spirit told me to go with these men to Caesarea and not to make a distinction between them and us.” I want to repeat that – because it is both simple and profound. The Spirit said, “do not to make a distinction between them and us.” Them and us. This is radical. Throughout their history, for the Jewish people there has been a “them and us.” Laws had been established and policies, procedures, and practices enacted, all to distinguish “them and us.”

Peter continues telling the story of his visit to Caesarea, “And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ... 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?” Who was I that I could hinder God? Talk about a question for the ages.

In this section of the Book of Acts we see some dramatic changes in Peter’s understanding of who God is calling into the body of believers and what they need to do to be welcomed into the family of faith. One of the tensions of the early church was how to live into the words of the Great Commission. Words that are echoed by Jesus in the beginning of the book of Acts: “and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Sounds great doesn’t it...but the reality of how those who were followers of Jesus who came from the Jewish tradition and those who came from non-Jewish traditions – the Gentiles – learned to worship, pray and yes eat together was fraught with tension, to put it mildly. The ensuing culture clashes resulted in conflicts big and small, as the Book of Acts and Paul’s various letters share. It was not rainbows and unicorns in those early days. Nor has it been since. The work of the church is hard and it requires transformation – and praise be that the work of transformation is led by the work of the Holy Spirit. Because it was solely up to us, I imagine we would never quite get there.

You see Peter struggled in those early days to understand how a community could be formed from those from such different traditions. How could he, one who observed the Jewish religious traditions like circumcision and the dietary laws laid down by Moses – how could he make disciples of those who did not follow the same path he did unless **they changed**. For Peter these non-Jewish believers must adopt the ways and traditions of the initial followers of Jesus. They must be circumcised and they must follow the dietary laws. And then something happened and Peter’s mind is changed.

*“How my mind has changed”* is the title of a periodic column that the magazine *Christian Century* runs. As they describe this column... During times of turbulence in politics, culture, and religious life, it’s tempting to hold tightly to current convictions. Allowing a change of one’s mind or heart can be difficult work. With this in mind, we ask leading thinkers to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, and hopes as they address the topic, “How my mind has changed.”

In a column last July, author Francis Spufford wrote about how his mind was changed about a specific issue in the church. The issue itself is not as relevant to me as the epiphany he had that allowed his mind to be changed. He says, “what changed my mind ... was thinking about how the church—the whole body of believers spread across space and time—changes its

mind historically...how, in every conceivable future short of the arrival of the kingdom, it will need to go on changing, as human situations change and the Holy Spirit continues to work within us.”<sup>2</sup>

Spufford walks through a litany of situations where there has been changes in understanding and discusses the tension we live in as people of faith, struggling to allow the bold work of the Spirit and at the same time being faithful to the Gospel. He concludes, “I’ve come to think that while Christian history is messy, it has a pattern. The pattern is this: where a rule and a principle are in conflict, the principle in the end prevails. In the end, with much heat and shouting and foot-dragging and confusion, we always set aside the rule, or remake it, in order that we may live more fully by the principle.”

This was the challenge Peter faced. Does he follow the rules, delineating a “them and us?” Or does he recognize the work of the Holy Spirit? Peter answers this question, saying: 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 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.”

What Peter proclaims is the miracle of transformation that happens when the Holy Spirit gets involved. The empty places get filled with grace and peace. And sometimes this transformation happens to those we least expect it to.... The circumcised believers (that is those who came from the Jewish tradition) who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even to the Gentiles. **Even to the Gentiles...** imagine that ... the Holy Spirit was poured out “even to...” There is no more “them and us.”

What a change in the mind and posture of Peter. He says nothing about the need for circumcision or following the dietary laws or keeping the Sabbath. The Holy Spirit has not only transformed these Gentiles into followers of Jesus, but also transformed Peter into a radical act of inclusion.

Think about those “thems” in our own life. Who are those who we don’t think are worthy or deserving or have followed the rules enough to have a seat at the table? Who don’t have the right pedigree or skin color or sexual orientation or political views or status or lifestyle for their voice to be heard and embraced. Are we open to having our minds changed by the power of the Holy Spirit – like Peter’s mind was changed? Are we open to rejecting the “them and us” mentality?

Yesterday we had a dramatic and tragic example of “them and us” thinking in Buffalo, NY. A self-proclaimed White supremacist killed ten people and injured three at the Tops Friendly Market. The shooter intentionally sought a location in a predominantly black neighborhood. He livestreamed the attack and can be heard saying, “Just got to go for it.” Friends, thoughts and prayers are not enough. We need to be transformed as a society and as individuals, just like Peter was.

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<sup>2</sup> Francis Spufford. From rules to principles. Christian Century. July 28, 2021, vol 138 No. 15. p26-31. Online at: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/how-my-mind-has-changed/how-i-changed-my-mind-about-same-sex-marriage?reload=1652188210857>

This work of transformation is the real work of the church. The real work for each one of us. The real work to examine our souls for who we perceive those people are – the ones we look down on because they don't check all of the right boxes – and recognize that God pours out the Holy Spirit **even to** them. They are “us.” We are “them.” This is hard work – this work of transformation of ourselves – when the narratives we believed for so long are challenged. When we allow ourselves to be uncertain about what we were sure we were right about. Peter will tell you. It is hard work. It is real work. The poet Wendell Berry says it this way....

It may be that when we no longer know what to do  
we have come to our real work,  
and that when we no longer know which way to go  
we have come to our real journey.<sup>3</sup>

We have real work ahead of us my friends. Real work to recognize that the Holy Spirit falls “**even to them...**” those whom we may not choose. Real work to not just welcome them, but to insist that they be baptized in God's love and grace. Real work to be the ones that are the vehicles of that love and grace. Real work to have our minds changed. And praise be for the power of the Holy Spirit to be the vehicle for that transformation. Join me in prayer.

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<sup>3</sup> Wendell Berry. Our Real Work. *Collected Poems*, 1952-1987. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987.