

“Acting on a Vision: Part 1”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
May 6, 2007
Scripture: Acts 11:1-18

Let me begin by saying that I hesitate to say this out loud. Just about every week we have several visitors here who have not been involved in church in a long time. And just about every week, we have some visitors here who are members of other churches that are going through tough times and find that it is easier to worship here. And I hesitate to say this out loud because things are going so well here. We seem pretty happy, energized, united in being the church despite considerable and beautiful diversity. But, in order for us to understand this story from the Bible, it must be said. There once was a church fight. A bitter, divisive fight that cut to the heart of what it meant to be the church of Jesus Christ. And it happened almost at the very beginning. The conflict pivoted around one question: what do we do with the Gentiles?

Now remember something. Jesus was a Jew. The first disciples were Jews. Jesus spent his whole life, at least what we know of it, in the area around Palestine, not far from the holy city of Jerusalem. Those early followers of Jesus eventually formed the church, Jews who believed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. These followers, these church members, still followed all the Jewish ways: they kept the Sabbath. They read the Torah. They ate a kosher diet. And they circumcised their boys as a ritual entrance into the community.

Now it was not easy to be a Jew, or an early follower of Jesus during the first century. The Roman Empire was powerful, and it was seductive. We talked about this last week, but the simple greeting of the time, “Caesar is Lord,” could hardly be said by someone whose faith proclaimed not Caesar but, “Jesus is Lord.” In the gymnasiums of the day, with the Roman spas, well how to put this – you never had to worry about which spandex shorts to wear. And circumcision, usually a private matter, became obvious in this setting of recreation and networking. And then there was the eating. If you have ever tried to be a vegetarian, or if you are following a specific diet and have to go to a dinner party, you have known the pressures of trying to avoid eating what everyone else is oohing and aahing over without offending the host.

And so a purity system was established. To keep the faith from being contaminated. To keep the holy from becoming profane. As one scholar says, these purity laws demarcated faithfulness in the midst of incredible pressure to forsake the faith, drop one’s particularities and become a good citizen of the Empire. A little pork here, a pinch of incense to Caesar there, and it will not be long before the faith community will be politely obliterated.¹

In the face of incredible pressures to give up the faith and follow the Empire, this new church took root. But then the church spread beyond Jerusalem, spread through the trade routes, spread as new churches were launched in the cities of the Roman Empire. And there, in addition to reaching the established Jewish communities, the preachers found a receptive audience with Gentiles. Non-Jews. And the question was this: would these Gentiles need to become Jews first

in order to then become Christians?² Sure they read the Torah. They say they believed in Jesus. But must they keep kosher? And, in a sign of their commitment and permanency of their conversion, did the men need to be circumcised before being baptized and received into the fellowship of the church? If they ate whatever they wanted and didn't get circumcised, how did the church know what they really believed?

“We tend to dismiss it as a quaint argument,” Pete Peery once preached. But “it was the most incendiary issue imaginable.”

This was a huge issue for the early church especially within the context of the Roman Empire. To lower the bar to include Gentiles meant for many that the church was moving down the slippery slope of accommodation with the world.³

The spread of the church brought this conflict to the foreground. It was a question of identity. It was a question of what the church stood for. It created tensions in the group of apostles and church leaders. It was a fight, not just over who belonged - who was in and who was out, but over what one must do in order to belong. Everyone is welcome, some churches proclaim, as long as you look like us and act like us and don't question why we do things! If we let in those who stay uncircumcised, why would anyone choose to get circumcised? If we let in those who keep eating whatever they want, how on earth are we going to have community meals? Think of our 3rd Sunday lunches - we can't serve pork chops for some and careful kosher kebabs for others and just pretend everything is fine, can we?

Do you see how tricky this issue was? It threatened to tear apart the church before it even really got started. It called into question a whole worldview that made distinctions between right and wrong, good and bad, clean and unclean, Jew and Gentile. What do we do with the Gentiles?

Peter found himself involved in this issue. He stayed with a certain Simon, a tanner, in the seaside town of Joppa (Acts 9:43, 10:5). Now this is interesting. Peter is staying with a tanner. And no devout person who considered himself to be a part of the people of God would stay with a tanner. For tanners handled the carcasses of animals. And, by the law of Moses, Holy Scripture itself, tanners were unclean.⁴ That meant that by staying with the tanner, Peter would also be unclean. And, we might add, his clothes would smell!⁵

From what happened at Simon the tanner's house, Peter ended up baptizing Gentiles into the church. He stayed with Gentiles, he ate with Gentiles. And before baptizing them, staying with them, eating with them, Peter never demanded that they first change. He did not demand that first they undergo circumcision, first keep the laws of Moses and then and only then would he baptize them.

Now, back in Judea, the apostles and believers heard about Peter socializing with and baptizing the Gentiles. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, Acts says, “the circumcised believers criticized him, saying “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” (11:1-4) What was Peter doing, they wanted to know. They had never agreed that this was ok. What was Peter doing being a renegade, letting people in who had not yet proved that they were worthy to become part of the church? Why was Peter watering down the gospel?

So, there in Jerusalem, Peter's closest colleagues – James and John, Andrew, Philip and all the rest sit Peter down for a little conversation. An intervention, a “come to Jesus” conversation to straighten him out, figure out a way to correct his mistakes, and purify the church.

And how does Peter explain himself to the church council in Jerusalem? He doesn't argue from Scripture, though he could have found texts to support his view, like the story of Ruth and Naomi – “your people will be my people and your God will be my God.” He doesn't remind them about stories and actions of Jesus, though he could have discussed Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman for sure. Peter doesn't offer a solid theological argument. All Peter does to defend his actions is to tell them about a dream he had.

They asked him “why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” And Peter began to explain it to them, saying, “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision” (11:5). I don't know about you, but I get a little nervous when someone begins to explain why they did something when they begin with “I was praying and in a trance, and I saw a vision.” Sounds like some sort of religious wacko, doesn't it? Dreams are not the most trustworthy indicators of truth, are they? Just this morning, Laura halfway woke up and said to me, “Did Arnold Schwarzenegger die? Because I was just asked to appoint the next governor for California.” Peter's only defense on this pivotal issue for the church is a dream?

But none of the apostles jump in to stop him, so Peter tells them his dream. And it is a wild dream Peter describes. “I was 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. (Acts 11:5-10)

Then, at that very moment, Peter says, three men arrive who had been sent to me from a man in the town of Caesarea. And the Spirit told me, Peter says, to go with them and not make a distinction between them and us.

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.” (Acts 11:12-18)

This fight about the gentiles would continue to simmer, and not get resolved in Acts for another few chapters. But in this story, all the other apostles in Jerusalem accept Peter's defense for including the Gentiles. He tells them his dream and says, "the Spirit told me to," and they were silenced and they trusted him.

At the beginning of the church there was a fight over whether to let the Gentiles in as is, or keep the church small and pure. What do we do about the Gentiles? And this original fight in the church continues to play out in churches everywhere. What do we do about those new members who come in wanting to change everything without learning our history first? What do we do about those people who come in and have different ideas and different interests and needs?

Clearly there is something in this story that urges us to be genuinely welcoming of new people. That the church is not some social club, some country club that revels in its five year waiting lists with a membership committee that asks you about your net worth and your employment and who your grandfather's business partners were. That the church, instead, is to be guided by the Spirit, and make no distinction between long time members with roots going back five generations and people new to America. That the church is to be guided by the Spirit, and break down distinctions and prejudices.

As a growing church, with so many people moving downtown near us and worshipping with us and eating with us, that is something for us to always watch for. But I think we are doing pretty well in following the Spirit, and including all who enter.

What seems most interesting to me in this passage today is that in explaining his actions, Peter simply says that he was acting on a vision. That was enough. And the others, according to this story in Acts, trusted him and blessed the mission to the Gentiles. Acting on a vision, the church took hold and blossomed. Throughout the book of Acts, the history of the early church, actions were taken for this simple reason, there was a vision, a dream. And the Spirit told them how to be the church.

We have a vision for this church. We think it is guided by the Spirit. A vision of being in the city for good. A vision of reaching out to people moving downtown, giving them a sense of community. A vision of a multi-cultural church that embraces the music and food and stories of a beautiful array of people who can talk about what God is doing in their lives. A vision of a church that loves kids and helps them grow and still cares for older adults. A vision of a church that supports new parents and supports those caring for their own parents. A vision of a church that reaches out in love to those who are vulnerable, here in Saint Paul and across the world. A vision of a church that blends our talents and gifts and uses them to do God's work. We have a vision for this church. And we are acting on it. And we pray that we may continue to be blessed by God's spirit.

Now let me tell you about a dream I had last night . . .

¹ William Willimon, Acts: Interpretation Commentary (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988) 96. I am grateful to Pete Peery for this quote, and for his sermon “Why This?” preached at the First Presbyterian Church of Asheville, North Carolina and available on the Covenant Network of Presbyterians website, www.covenantnetwork.org.

² Some of these Gentiles may have been what was called “God-fearers,” devout Gentiles who worshipped at synagogues but had never officially converted to Judaism.

³ Peery.

⁴ Peery emphasizes that the tanning profession is unclean.

⁵ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, The Acts of the Apostles: The Anchor Bible Commentary series (New York: Doubleday, 1998). Fitzmyer says, “Peter is depicted as lodging with a man whose trade was often scorned by ancient Pharisees because of the odors associated with it.”