

“TO THE GENTILES ALSO.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Acts 11:1-18

This is our fourth sermon on the Cornelius conversion and the Gentile Pentecost. Luke sure thought it important to repeat the details this much, and more importantly the Holy Spirit thought it was so important to inspire Luke to record it and repeat it for all generations to know.

But this is not just repetition for repetition sake. There is something important going on here, without which the story would be incomplete. This isn't just be an event in the life of Peter. This story has ramifications for the whole church and the spreading of the Gospel.

Paul's conversion story is told three times in the book of Acts. These are pivotal, sea-changing stories. Their impact reverberates through the rest of salvation history.

The conversions of these two men may be the two most important events in redemptive history until the return of Christ. After these two there is no stopping the church as it advances through the world.

Acts 11:1-3, Peter's charge.

Bad news travels fast. The rumors get to Jerusalem before Peter does. Someone must have put it on Facebook/Facescroll.

Peter is called on the carpet for fraternizing with Gentiles, for breaking Jewish laws by entering their homes and eating with them.

The charges are brought by the circumcision party in the Jewish Christian church in Jerusalem. This is probably a reference to a faction in the church that had very strong racial prejudice and held everyone to a higher standard of keeping Jewish food laws and ceremonial laws.

How strongly did they hold these views? They heard they had received the Word of God and that wasn't enough to change their attitude, they still have issues. Maintaining their Jewishness was more important than that.

Acts 11:4-17, Peter's defense.

Peter submits to letting his actions and his doctrine be tested by the church. He is humble and accountable. He didn't say, "I am an apostle, who are you to question me?" Peter follows his own advice in his first letter:

I Peter 3:15 ... always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.

In chapter 10 we had Luke's telling of the story with the focus on the individual Cornelius. Chapter 11 we hear the story straight from Peter's lips, and the focus is on what Cornelius' conversion means for the whole church.

Peter is one of them, a Jewish Christian, Peter is like them in his long-held prejudices. This surprised Peter as much as anyone. This was not instigated by Peter. It would literally take an act of God to dismantle his Jewish prejudice which is exactly what God does through four decisive blows, that Peter carefully describes blow by blow.

The *first* blow came through a divine vision (4-10). A sheet lowered from heaven with all kinds of clean and unclean creatures in it and the voice of God commanding him to eat. After Peter refused, calling them unclean, God rebuked him. This happened three times.

The clean and unclean animals were a representation of clean and unclean, or circumcised and uncircumcised people. In other words, the sheet was the church with people from all races and classes and ethnic backgrounds.

The *second* blow came through the divine voice (11-12) to go with the three Gentiles from Caesarea who had at that exact moment arrived to invite him to come to a Roman centurion's house. Peter didn't go by himself but took six brothers, so there were seven witnesses.

The *third* blow came through the divine preparation/intervention (13-14). God had prepared Cornelius ahead of time. God was working both ends of the deal. God gave two visions in which He told Cornelius to go get Peter and in which He told Peter to go to Cornelius. This is all being supernaturally and sovereignly arranged.

The *fourth* blow came through the divine manifestation that happened as a result (15-17). While Peter was speaking the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentile believers just as He had earlier done on the Jewish believers.

Did you notice, Peter doesn't repeat what he said to Cornelius and his household. Why? Peter didn't want to make a case or argument based on what he said, but only on what God did.

There is a wonderful lesson in that for us when we have an opportunity to share our faith with someone. You don't have to go into a lot of theology, just tell them what God has done in your life, how Jesus has forgiven you, how He has taken away your guilt and anxiety and fear of death, how He has given your life meaning and hope.

This final blow got everyone's attention. There could be no possible denying the similarity between the Jewish Pentecost and the Gentile Pentecost.

With these four wrecking ball blows the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Greeks, Jews and Gentiles was demolished. The Jew's racial prejudice and Peter's was conclusively destroyed, God was welcoming all believers into His kingdom and so must they.

So Peter closes his explanation with the clenching rhetorical question:

Acts 11:17 If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?"

Over even Peter's own prejudices, opinions and opposition God Himself decisively answered the question.

Who will stand against God? Who can argue with God?
What God has put together, let no man put asunder.
When God opens a door, let no man shut it.

It is a compelling vision grounded entirely in the authority of God.

Acts 11:18, They fell silent and glorified God.

Two things happened in response, two remarkable things, two uncommon things.

They stopped criticizing and they started worshiping. They could have just been silenced by Peter's argument, as if not able to think of anything to say, yet still be unconvinced, unchanged.

But that notion is tossed aside when they stopped being silent and started worshiping and praising God. They praised God for also granting Gentiles repentance that leads to life.

Now that's a church where the Spirit of God is, not complaining and grumbling and instead worshiping and praising God and expressing gratitude for who He is and what He is doing.

The attitude of the whole church changed. The church's vision was enlarged. This was truly God's doing, this was God-sized. This was world shaping, world encompassing.

The Gentiles were baptized as full members of the church, not second class citizens. They didn't have to fulfil other requirements like circumcision or keeping the Jewish Law.

This is not easy to do. We will see later in Acts the Jerusalem church struggled getting on board with this new movement of God.

Peter and the Jewish Christians did something very hard to do, shallow their pride, put aside their centuries old prejudice, open the doors of the church to outsiders, open their hearts to people different to them, people who didn't share their tastes or preferences or ways of doing things.

Peter would stumble and fall back into his old patterns of thinking and in Galatians Paul rebuked him to his face.

We all fall into old patterns of thinking, into patterns of discrimination, racism, nationalism, tribalism. We have to remind ourselves God accepts all who repent and believe without discrimination, favoritism or partiality.

In our increasingly divided country let us work harder to keep the spirit of unity in the church.

A question about inclusion and diversity and tolerance and changing our thinking.

Is God doing this today, is He trying to change our minds, do we need to be more inclusive, are we are too uptight or intolerant of certain people? Let me give two brief responses to help us think Biblically about this.

First, no one in the early church was looking for this change or pressing for it. Nothing in their culture suggested it to them. Today where is most of the pressure for the church to change coming from? It's coming from the culture, from the world, trying to press us into its mold, to move beyond Scripture.

Second, the inclusion of the Gentiles was foretold countless times in the OT. Abraham was told he would be a blessing to all nations and Israel was told it would be a light to the nations. Jesus said in the Gospels that He was bringing salvation to the nations and sent the apostles out.

God wasn't changing His mind here. This is not about God relaxing His standards.

Eph 2:11-17 Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, ... were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he

himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. 17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.

This was about Jesus fulfilling all the OT laws and ceremony, this was about the blood of Jesus reconciling and uniting and opening the doors of the Gospel and the Church to all who will come in through repentance and faith. This is not about abandoning Scripture and winking at sin.

Implications and application.

How many of us are aware of how God is at work around us? How many of us are showing up on Sunday morning but ignoring God's call and purpose for us the rest of the week?

What barriers is God seeking to breakdown around you? What in your life is God-sized? What in your life is something that if it happens it will clearly be God and not you? Something completely disproportionate to who you are and what you have? Beyond what you could ask or imagine? What are you investing in that is eternal?

Do you even think that way, do you ask God for something like that?

I want to speak to us of four visions here at First Church. I use the term a bit loosely, but they are big, they are God-sized, and they will challenge us and stretch us in different ways.

I suspect while we have heard about each of them, we haven't put them all together in our minds and in our prayers so let me bring them into focus for you.

First, we have a vision for Serve 2020. Are we praying for this? Right now, we are praying for a speaker. Are we open to join hands with many here across all generations from middle school to senior saints to be a blessing to the youth groups who come and the people we serve? As the Spirit sent Peter, pray He will send us a speaker and the right mix of high school kids.

Second, we have a vision for a new staff position, something we haven't done before, a full-time ordained associate pastor. This is a big step. It is also a risk. Associate pastor positions are hard to do. It's like playing the hardest instrument in the orchestra, second violin, and having to turn the pages for the first violin, being in the subordinate position. It can lead to conflict.

The applications are just now starting to come in. This vision needs to be covered in constant prayer. We need God to choose just the right person with just the right gifts who will fit in our culture and context. Pray the Holy Spirit will sovereignly prepare the way as He did with Cornelius.

Third, we have a vision for a new building. It is a huge vision and a big building. The team is working and making progress. Will it be something that stretches and challenges us? Will it glorify Him and be used well for decades to come?

Someone once said it is a sign of maturity to plant a tree in whose shade you will never rest. Some people built this building or added to it over the years in ways they would not benefit from, but they did it for future generations. That is vision. Do we have that kind of vision? Will God surprise us by what He does that we thought impossible?

Those first three are about us and for us, there is a fourth that stretches us beyond ourselves.

Fourth, we have a vision to be a prayer advocate for one of the largest most unreached people groups in the world, for 30 million Hausa Muslims in northern Nigeria who don't know Jesus. Is that a God-sized prayer? Will you join us in praying for that?

By the way I got an email forwarded to me about two weeks ago from Tim Lewis who was asked by a man in Nigeria for discipleship materials in the Hausa language so he could disciple a recent Hausa convert. Did our prayers lead to a conversion? Isn't that how it will happen, one Cornelius at a time? Do you have that kind of vision for what God can do among the most resistant Muslims? Do you want God to be glorified in Nigeria?

Is God using us to be a part of something new among the Muslims? Will God open a door to them? Can God change our hearts not to be prejudiced but full of love for people who consider us enemies?

These are huge challenges that will stretch our faith over the next year. God is pushing our boundaries, God is moving us forward. We need to pray for God to guide us, we need to pray for God to guard and protect us until as we move forward, we need to pray for God's will to be done, we need to pray for God to provide what we will need to do these things, we need to pray for His sufficient grace and for His power and wisdom to be made manifest in our ignorance and weakness.

It is good to have God-sized visions and plans, it stretches our faith, it keeps us on our knees, and it glorifies Him when we see Him answer and give Him the glory.