

God's New Thing

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 11:1-18

¹ Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³ saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" ⁴ Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵ "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. ⁶ As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷ I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸ But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' ¹⁰ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹ At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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; ¹⁴ he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' ¹⁵ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶ 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.' ¹⁷ 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?" ¹⁸ 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."

Several years ago Joseph S. Harvard went to Israel on an interfaith journey with members of a Jewish congregation, an African American congregation, and the congregation he served. They went to experience together the places that were important in their sacred stories, and it was an incredible trip for all of them. He did not want to share "A Pastor's Travelogue on His Trip to the Holy Land." He mentioned the trip because Joppa was their first stop after landing in Tel Aviv. His traveling companion, Rabbi John Friedman, said he knew that Joseph wanted to see the house of Simon the tanner where Peter had his vision. Jews know many Christian stories, and his friend knew this one was crucial to the development of the early church.

The visit to Simon's house was a great place to start their journey. Their trip was in the summer of 2001, shortly before the events of September 11. In the years since then, he has come to realize how Peter's story has taken on even more significance since 9/11.

The text from Acts begins with Peter reporting to the church leaders in Jerusalem. It sounds as if he was being called on the carpet for breaking the rules. He had been eating with "the uncircumcised." A similar change had been leveled against Jesus for eating with sinners ([Luke 15:2](#)). So Peter was in good company, but that did not make his confrontation with the Jerusalem leaders easy.

Have you ever been to a church meeting when you could feel the tension in the air? Such meetings often center around who is "in" and who is "out;" who is right and who is wrong! In the present case, the tension was between those drawing a narrow circle of inclusion around the gospel and others who were busy expanding the circle until all God's children had a place at the table.

Would the Gentiles have a place? That was the question hanging in the balance along with the integrity and expansion of the early church. Fortunately, God had a witness. Peter was the pivotal figure, the rock, whose confession changed the dynamics of Jesus' relationship with his followers and opened the door to discipleship. Remember the promise that the risen Lord made to his disciples, that they would receive the power of the Holy Spirit ([Acts 1:8](#))? The fulfillment of this promise is nowhere more evident than in the boldness of Peter's testimony in Jerusalem. God empowered Peter, an ordinary fisherman, to play a significant role in the mission of the church.

God enables ordinary people to be witnesses to the gospel. This can be frightening, because it voids our excuses that we are not gifted enough, not old enough, (too old), not good enough to get the job done. God has always had the audacity to choose ordinary people to do extraordinary things in the service of God's reign. Such a realization should give us hope and strengthen our resolve to join the cloud of witnesses from Abraham, Sarah, and Moses to Esther and Jeremiah, Mary and Pricilla, Peter and Paul.

Peter gave testimony to the church leaders about a vision he received while praying on the roof. He saw a sheet being lowered from heaven with a variety of creatures on it. He was told to "kill and eat." Peter refused because the food was "profane" and "unclean." Then he heard the crucial line, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (10:15). This cycle repeated three times, and then everything was taken up into heaven.

This vision was followed by the arrival of three men from Caesarea who appeared at the door. Peter was instructed by the Spirit to go with them and not distinguish between "them and us" (11:12). When he arrived at Cornelius's house and preached, the Spirit led the Gentiles present to salvation. Peter concluded that God had given them the same gift God had given to Jewish believers. Then he asked the profound question, "Who was I that I could hinder God?" (v. 17). **Joseph S. Harvard**

Think about the astonishing insight contained in that question. If God so loved the world that Jesus came not to condemn the whole world but to save it, who are we to try to limit the mission of God to redeem humanity? Every time we exclude someone from full participation in the redemptive efforts of God, Peter's question should trouble us and the church. What if the church had closed the door to the Gentiles, and Christianity had remained a sect within Judaism? Peter was persuaded that God the creator did not intend to exclude anyone from the community of God's care. His conclusion was revolutionary.

To grasp what is involved here, there can be no better example than the revulsion felt by many (but of course far from all) Christians across the globe today at same-sex relationships and practices. Nothing could seem, from their point of view, more "unclean." Or what if we welcomed all those who have been in prison or released from drug rehabilitation programs into our fellowship! What kind of rules would we want to impose? We are revolted, we would find reasons to exclude them from the fellowship. We would try to find Scripture to make lines of separation. However, a change of heart will come when we see the Spirit at work in the stories of strangers, recognizing in them the same Spirit that is working in our own lives. We need first to see God at God's

surprising work. Theological reflection will come afterward, either to bring what has been *seen* into coherence with past thinking, or to make a reasoned break with that thinking. In the ancient world, one would search the Scriptures in order to find a place in them for the new insight. Then one would seek principles for integrating the new vision in practice. **Lewis S. Mudge**

Those of us in the faith community often use the word "discernment." Peter discerned the connection between his vision and the three visitors who asked him to travel to Caesarea with them. Luke makes it clear that the gift of discernment is the work of God's Spirit. If there is hope for the church in these days when there is so much dissension and division in faith communities, then we must pray to have visions that bring us together to receive the gift of discernment. We need to be open to the work of God's healing and reconciling Spirit.

More amazing than Peter's vision and discernment was how the leaders in Jerusalem responded. They listened and were open to the new reality Peter envisioned. They could have said, "You are out of your mind, and this is wrong!" Instead, the Holy Spirit gave them the ability to listen and to change.

As we go about our business in the church, the world is watching. Do we have anything to offer that differs from other groups characterized by dissension and division? Can we listen to each other and seek to discover where God's Spirit is leading? Can we broaden the table so everyone has a place? **Joseph S. Harvard**

Do we discern God's new thing? Do we understand there is a whole world of people who are looking to have a relationship with God, without the narrow judgments and rules we impose on them. Will we have the courage to see God's new thing and share the Good News with everyone, not just the one we judge are worthy?