

Easter C5  
 April 24, 2016  
 “Stories”  
 Central Presbyterian Church  
 David Noble

### Acts 11:1-18

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

1.

This has got to be my favorite Bible story. That doesn’t mean anything except that I ask you once in while what your favorite Bible story is, so it seems only fair that you know mine. And it turns out it is also one of the Bible’s favorite stories, because it is told twice in the Book of Acts, in chapters 10 and 11. From beginning to end it is told twice, as if we didn’t hear it the first time. But we’ll save that for later. The early Church loved this story a lot and for the same reason I do: it answers the question about who is welcome to be a Christian, who is welcome to be in God’s family.

We proudly stamp it on the front of every bulletin: *Everyone is welcome here*. But it wasn’t always so.

In the beginning, as stories start, in the beginning there was a great argument about whether Gentiles could be Christians. You know, Gentiles? People who are not Jewish, not sons and daughters of Abraham, people who don’t follow the customary laws about what you can and can’t eat. You know, people like us. Gentiles were unclean, to be avoided. Never go into their homes. Never share a meal with them. And as long as we’re at it, only eat animals that have divided hoofs and chew their cud. These are clean animals. And never, never eat an animal that slithers on the ground. And don’t eat water creatures that don’t have scales and fins. All of these are unclean. In other words, reject whatever is unclean.

Well, the Apostle Peter knew these rules. He had lived by them his whole life. So his story was unimaginable. God gave him a vision of animals being lowered from heaven on a sheet. Some were unclean, yet God told him he should eat any of them. What was God saying? Well, it was

all a metaphor for who God wanted to be in the church. Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Oil and water. Insiders and outsiders. Break down the barriers.

This was a turning point in the life of the early Christian church. It was so big it took decades to finally get the church used to the idea.

2.

It seems, though, that inclusivity has continued to be a challenge throughout the life of God's church. How many times has the church declared some group of people to be permanent outsiders only to realize God wants them, too?

I have been through a number of these scuffles over the years.

Like back in Michigan 16 years ago I became the first associate pastor in the Presbytery of Detroit to work for a woman head of staff. The year 2000? Can you believe we were still working on that? And the issue about ordaining gays and lesbians was always a hot button issue until just a few years ago. In 2002, the church I was serving finally began to talk about it and in 2013 a gay friend was ordained who had waited half his life for the opportunity to be a pastor.

To me, the church has always seemed to import the values of the culture. And after the culture has started to change then the church begins to see new possibilities. I wish we were leading the charge a little more often.

But part of the reason we don't, I think, is that stories like today's story about Peter aren't confidently in our vocabulary. The Bible is a book for worship but not so much a book for learning or to be used to guide decisions.

It can be hazardous to share stories, but I'm going to take a risk and tell you one about me.

I once had a crazy idea for an adult education class. This goes way out before it comes back, so be patient.... There was a Star Trek episode in the first version of that series that had Captain Kirk marooned on a planet with a leader of another world who only spoke in metaphors. He was only able to speak in phrases that described a whole story. I don't remember any of the TV show conversation anymore, but it would be something like this: If Captain Kirk wanted to say, "We need to tell the truth to each other," he might say instead, "As George Washington cut down the cherry tree." And that brings to mind the whole story of telling the truth and how important it is.

Well, my idea was, could we become able to speak to each other in a similar way? Could we discuss an important issue in the church and use only metaphors that bring to mind whole Bible stories that tell our point? So if we were discussing whether or not purple people should be allowed as leaders in the church, we could say, "As Peter saw the sheet filled with animals," it would bring to mind the whole story of inclusion. Or how about, "As the multitudes gathered in the Revelation to John and praised God with one voice," a vision of how the nations will one

day come together as God's people, or one more, "As the thirst of the woman at the well was quenched by Jesus' love and mercy," a story that brings to mind Jesus reaching out to a person who was unwelcome in her own community.

3.

So why, do you suppose, this story of Peter and the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church is told twice? The only difference is in the setting. After Peter has visited the Gentile family, eaten a meal in their home, and baptized them into the church, he is called back to Jerusalem, to the home office to explain his behavior. Why did he do this unlawful thing? Who did he think he was?

He could have argued. He could have laid out a well-reasoned defense of his actions- point by point refuting their criticisms of him. But he didn't. He told a story. And he told it in a way that invited his critics into it so it could become their story. Peter didn't want to break the law. He didn't want to create problems. But God spoke to him and he had to do something. What would they have done?

The Jerusalem Council was silenced. His critics had no response, except that they praised God together that God had done an amazing thing. The controversy was settled. The point was made. A story is a powerful thing.

4.

At our last meeting I asked the Session to begin talking about evangelism, about sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with our community. It is time now for us to tackle this as a congregation. Jesus calls his followers, us, to share the good news by word and deed. We like the deed part. We are more than comfortable with doing good works in the community as a way of proclaiming the love of God. But what words can we use? How can we talk about God with our friends and neighbors without seeming too pious or self-righteous?

Stories. Our stories. Peter used his story to change the minds of his friends, to transform the ways they thought about God and themselves, to bring them closer to God and God's will for them. That's what evangelists do. Good evangelists don't go out to debate with people, to prove a point, to win an argument. Good evangelists tell their stories in a way that invites others to take them on as their own stories.

What are your stories? When have you had an encounter with God that had an effect on you? That changed you? That transformed you? Maybe you have a story like that and you know it.

Then again, you may never have thought about it that way. Maybe it takes looking back to see what was happening and how God was at work in you or around you. Your stories are important. I want to encourage you to see them and begin to tell them. They are important to you, to us, and to our ministry in this community.

Over the next year evangelism is going to be an important topic for us. I hope we start preparing ourselves to be evangelists like Peter, who simply shared his story with friends, his experience of God's intervention in his life, in such a way that they could hear it and be changed by the good news. Let's tell stories to our children of how God changed our minds, or opened us to new possibilities. Let's share our stories with each other at Session and Deacons and in Bible study and at coffee hour. Let's take the chance and then let the Spirit take up where our stories end.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word, Year C, volume 2, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2002, p455.