

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“On the Edge”

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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. 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.’

This past week I noticed that the little league baseball and softball players are beginning their spring practice sessions. I get a little envious, wishing I could join them. I recall a moment in time from my own illustrious Little League career. A late afternoon thunderstorm had preceded the game, leaving the area immediately behind home plate covered with a large puddle. But both coaches and umpires agreed the game could still be played if home plate and the pitching rubber were both moved out just a little. The puddle would be there but the umpire would work around it. As the game progressed it became rather lopsided. My team was well ahead and everyone was in high spirits. We began to think more about having fun than playing baseball. One of my teammates began the circus. As he sprinted into home from third base, he dove face-first right into

the middle of the puddle behind home plate. He was a muddy mess, but he was smiling with joy. We all laughed and thought he was the coolest kid alive! We wanted to be just like him. Soon, everyone who scored followed his example, taking a bath in the home plate puddle. The very next inning I had my chance. I did it up well. I slid through the greasy mud and sprayed the water puddle all over my shoes, my socks, my pants, my shirt and my hat. I stood up proud. And then I glanced at my mother sitting in the bleachers. Her look said it all. She was ready to disown me. I recall sitting on an old blanket on the way home, so I wouldn't get mud all over the car. I recall hearing my mother complain all week about using stain removers and still not getting the mud from my uniform. I tried to explain that it was baseball and I had to get dirty to really get into the game. But she was my mother and she cared more about a clean uniform than the joy of play.

I was watching the Sunday night baseball game on ESPN a couple of weeks featuring the Philadelphia Phillies and the Atlanta Braves. The cameras and the announcers kept focusing on Phillies second baseman Chase Utley. Utley starred, albeit in a losing cause in last year's World Series. This particular night he was a very active part of the game, making a couple great defensive plays, getting a couple of hits, running the bases with reckless abandon. He had the brown-red dirt of the infield all over his uniform, from the tops of his shoes even onto his bright red hat. As the camera froze on Utley, one of the commentators said this, "Look at his uniform! It's filthy. How are they gonna get that clean? But Chase Utley is a real baseball player and you can't really play baseball unless you are getting your uniform dirty!"

The Scripture lesson this morning is a story of a dream of the apostle Peter. It is the story of a trance, the push of the Holy Spirit, and an angel who offers interpretation and direction to the dream. These things beyond our reason, outside of box of our rational control, on the edge of any comfort level. Yet it is these mysterious things which produce action in ordinary people, action that alters the future of the Christian church. The familiar way of following commands based on tradition and law was replaced by a new attentiveness to the mystery by which God is ready to work.

In short, Peter's vision was about leaving behind the religious laws and purity codes that defined how one did religion long ago. He dreamed of a large sheet lowered from heaven and upon it all sorts of birds and reptiles and animals. Peter was ordered to kill and eat these creatures but he refused because they were not ritually clean. He then heard the voice of God saying that nothing created by God was truly unclean. Peter was told to make no distinction between the clean and unclean. At that very moment three visitors appeared at his door. The Spirit intervened and urged Peter to follow them to a stranger's house. There he was told that it was an angel who directed the men to search for him in the first place. The mystery of the moment moved Peter to baptism the entire household, even though all of the people were Gentiles.

Peter's dream and the direction of the angel accounted for the changing of his heart concerning distinctions within the early Christian church. Before that day, Peter was the ultimate insider, the protector of the status quo within the community. Only Jews could be converted and only Jewish Christians were acceptable in the church. But because of that dream, Peter became convinced that the gospel of Jesus Christ was to be preached to Jew and Gentile alike. God's new work was to break down barriers that had existed between people of different beliefs and to unite them under the

common banner of Christ. The gospel was to be found in new words, broken open in new possibilities and preached to people who were different. From that point on Peter believed, Christian faith was not to be a matter of restraint, constraint and supporting the status quo. It was a matter of getting involved, getting dirty, and living on the edge.

Today the story continues to speak to us. As people of faith, we are prone to follow a more orderly course, rejecting spirit and dream and mystery. We are comfortable setting up distinctions- those who do things they way we do- the clean; and those who don't act the way we wish-the dirty. We prefer God to act with advance notice or at least with proper rational explanation. And we would rather live by a faith that makes us comfortable and helps us make sense out of the world. We shy away from a faith that challenges us, that pushes us out on the edge. We struggle to be holy and to maintain a holy community where God's glory can shine brightly. But we are human and our self-righteousness and our human desire for conformity and comfort makes us all less holy.

Like Peter, when we hear this passage we are invited not to hinder the work of God. God is doing something new. Distinctions are disappearing. Spirit is creating possibilities. Faith is moving away from the certainty of command to the mystery of finding God out of the ordinary. It would be easier if the Spirit would leave well enough alone but the Spirit of God cannot resist a broader vision and a greater hope.

William Willimon writes that when we as Christians, or as a church, settle down and become too parochial, the Holy Spirit tends to drift elsewhere. We then lose our imaginations and our energy. He writes of serving a church that decided to close its doors after a 70 year existence. They closed because as one of the church leaders said, "There is no one anywhere near our church that might join our church." Willimon said that what they really meant was that their church had found themselves in a different time and a different neighborhood than when it was created. It was called to a different ministry than the one they inherited. They didn't want to be different. Church growth is an expected byproduct of the gospel which is out in front, urging people to follow. Church decline is the expected result for a church which refuses to follow a gospel that demands they live on the edge.

James Bryant Conant once wrote, "Behold the turtle; he makes progress only when he sticks his neck out." This story in the book of Acts reminds us that the church and we as Christians are a force to be reckoned with when we do likewise, sticking our neck out, and living on the edge, allowing the spirit of God to move us to places that get us down and dirty. The power of God is not a barrier to restrain us and keep us from doing something. The power of God is like a wind that moves us to places unexpected, to see things previously unseen, and to do things demand we change. We are not to resist the trance, the dream or the spirit. We are to be where God leads us- on the edge.