

A New Thing...  
Acts 11: 1-18  
May 2, 2010

**In this past Tuesday's, *USA Today*, there is a story entitled "Young adults less devoted to faith: Survey shows steady drift from church life."** This story references research by LifeWay Christian Resources of 1,200 members of the Millennial generation or those ages 18-to 29 years old. The statistics provided stated that of those polled, 65% (780 out of the 1200) rarely or never prayed with others and 38% almost never pray by themselves either. Further, 65% (780 out of the 1200) **rarely or never attended worship services and 67% (804 of the 1200)** reported they did not read the Bible or sacred texts. The President of LifeWay Christian Resources is quoted as saying, "We have dumbed down what it means to be part of the church so much that it means almost nothing, even to people who already say they are part of the church."<sup>1</sup> Concerning **statistics and disheartening commentary from the President of LifeWay**. We are left asking: "What shall the church become? How shall it live out the revelation of God in Christ? Those are the dominant questions throughout [the book] of Acts."<sup>2</sup>

In today's reading from Acts, a book believed to have been written by Luke, we see Peter and the **early believers struggling with what the church was to become**. Our text is sort of the story after the story actually. Peter has, in Acts chapter 10, been led by the Holy Spirit to the household of Cornelius, a Gentile, and an outsider to the faith. As Peter is teaching them, "the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the **word.**" (**Acts 10: 44**) **So, Cornelius and all in his home** were then baptized with water following the presence of the Holy Spirit. Peter was subsequently invited by Cornelius to remain with them for several days. Meanwhile, word got back to the **other apostles in Judea of what Peter had done. They were** most offended that he had eaten

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<sup>1</sup> Cathy Lynn Grossman. USA Today. p. 1A. April 27,2010

<sup>2</sup> Dennis Bratcher. <http://www.cresourcei.org/lectionary/YearC/Ceaster5ac.html>

with Gentiles, with outsiders. They somehow missed the significance of the folks in Cornelius' home accepting the word of **God. Rather, they were more concerned about the** Old Testament laws that Peter had violated.

We find it difficult to fathom the significance of their consternation. In essence, the apostles were taking Peter to task because they were in fear that their faith was being watered **down even further by accepting the likes** of the Gentiles. There were boundaries for those who were accepted into the fold. There were rules to be followed and Peter was violating them egregiously. As noted theologian William Willimon explains it for the modern day believer, to say that one is Christian is to acknowledge that this designation also comes with limits. Willimon writes, "...we must have **boundaries, there must be limits to what somebody can** believe, or disbelieve, and still be a Christian. It's fair to have doubts, but it is not fair for us to gather here on Sunday and say, 'Jesus Christ is Lord,' while at the same time having most of our **members believe that Jesus is just a nice person who went** about doing good in the First Century. So we ask questions when you join [the church.] [We affirm our faith.] We submit to scripture. There are limits."<sup>3</sup> Thus, the dietary restrictions imposed during Peter's time reflected the limits of his community.

"It is this background that Peter faced when God told him to eat the "unclean" food. It is, in effect, a change from everything **he had been taught as important in his faith. He faced nothing** less than the total transformation of the shape and framework of his commitment to God. God was asking him, to an even greater degree than Abraham, to leave a place of security and identity, and launch **out into uncharted areas with nothing else** than the word of God in a

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<sup>3</sup> Dean William Willimon. "When Outsiders Become Insiders – Acts 11:1-8" 5/10/1998

vision to guide him. It was no small thing that God has asked of Peter!”<sup>4</sup> Really the heart of this task had nothing to do with the food. It had everything to do with Peter and the other apostles, **the people of faith, actually living out their faith. They were being led** by the Holy Spirit to not only say that “God shows no impartiality...,” but to actually live into that belief. The Good News is to be shared with everyone. We are to be welcoming of one another no matter who we are or where we are on life’s **journey. It is God, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, who asks** that of us. It was through the stirring of the Holy Spirit in the heart of Peter and also in the household of Cornelius that caused “even the Gentiles” to believe, repent of their sins, and **accept the gift of salvation offered through the resurrected** Christ. Those who had been considered outsiders were now a part of the fold.

“It is by means of this incident that Luke recounts the tremendous struggle of identity and mission that is emerging in the fledging community that would soon be called Christians (11:26). This is the single most crucial crisis **that the post-resurrection community would face, because** its resolution would forever define the nature of the Christian community and the church. [We have Peter saying to those who questioned his acting outside the bounds of what had been acceptable, ‘**God gave them – the Gentiles- the same** gift that God gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?’] The result was a unity of the believers. But it was a unity forged around a radically different set of assumptions about the faith than that with which it began. The point of unity was the leadership of God in the lives of these **people and this community, calling them to move beyond** where they were to where they needed to be in order to be able to meet the demands of a changing world.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bratcher. Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

**Our world is changing seemingly more rapidly each day.** The church is changing. God is calling us to change. In each biblical story that we read, God's underlying message to us is the same "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isa. 43:19a) Ours is an unchanging God, but a God of change. **Nothing is stagnant in our biblical stories.** God is telling God's children to prepare for change, to move, and to do. God is saying that to each of us as well.

**"What shall the church become? How shall it live out the revelation of God in Christ?"** The answer to these questions is simply, it is up to us to listen to the leading of the Holy Spirit upon our lives and to act when prompted. When we reflect back upon the concerning statistics of those polled by **LifeWay, when we look around us here today and see the empty pews** that were once filled, and when we reflect upon the lives of our neighbors, friends, and relatives, we are challenged to discern how have we chosen to follow or failed to follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit that says share the Good News with those around you. Do not merely be hearers of **God's word, but be doers also. We have been given the call to share** our faith with one another and with those who question why they should believe. In order to do that we must, like Peter, know our story. We must take the time to reflect back upon who God is in our faith, who God is in our lives, and the times **in which, if we are true to ourselves, we must acknowledge** that it was God and God alone who brought us out of our situation. Our faith journey, our story, is important not only to us but also in the lives of those around us.

I can speak to you about what it is like to live in poverty in Mississippi. I can speak to **you about the consequences and evil presence of racism.** I can speak to you about what it is to fear losing your home. I can speak to you about what it is to fear that you cannot afford to go to the doctor when you know there is something wrong with your body. I have a story just as all

of you. It is in the overcoming of those **fears and those circumstances that I can point to God** and truly say that God delivered me and God provided. For all of my worrying and all of my doubt, God revealed Godself to me and each time reminded me that I am loved and cared for. **Each tumultuous time in my life I can truly say** that God made a way out of no way. God has gone before me making the crooked places straight. Many of you can do the same. My story and your story are relevant in what the church will become and how God in Christ is revealed because our story is a part **of the ongoing story and presence of God in our world. Our** stories reveal who God is calling us to become.

Our text today "...is not an account of Peter deciding what to become; this is an account of God calling him to become, indeed calling the church to become. It is **God's** new work in the **world, calling people to follow. This commitment to God's work** in the world does not lessen our responsibility and our accountability to faithful response to God in servanthood."<sup>6</sup> The Gospel message exists not to sustain traditions, but to call people into relationship with God. Peace, we are being asked to struggle with **the questions of who are we being called to be as** people of faith, how is God calling us to act in a world that is behaving as though faith is irrelevant, and are we hindering God by failing to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit upon our **lives? How are we being called to change to meet the demands of a changing world?**

*"Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"* (Isa. 43:19a) Let us open our eyes and our hearts to the newness of God. Let us be doers of God's word. Amen

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid