

Sermon on Acts 11:1-11
CCRC, 18 May 2025
Rev. Tom Bomhof
God Is Breaking Down Walls

Dear Friends of God,
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During the COVID epidemic we were introduced to the notion of pivoting. When you pivot, you give up one way of doing things and start a different way of doing things.

We were doing church one way. We were meeting together like we always had: worshiping, kids programs, potlucks, small groups. Then suddenly COVID happened and the world shut down. Then we had to do church a different way. We suddenly had to stop gathering together. We suddenly had to get online and be together through video calls and livestreaming. We had to be in bubbles and exclude those not in our bubble. For over a year we worshiped in our homes, connected online, still together, but apart. Some of us enjoyed worshiping in our pajamas. We served communion over the internet. We checked in with each other over the phone. We had small groups online. We tried new things, we experimented with new ways of doing church together.

We pivoted. We had no choice. Our mission never changed. We were still about the task of building relationships with God, each other, and our neighbours. But we had to change the way we lived into that mission. When COVID became manageable, we eventually adapted back to gathering together.

This morning's passage marks another time that the church had to pivot. Only, this was a major pivot, one that makes our COVID pivot look minor in comparison. It was a huge turning point in the early church's understanding of God's plan of salvation. Before this moment, the followers of Jesus did church one way. After this moment, the believers did church a different way. Two thousand years later, we are still doing church in this different way. We didn't go back to the old ways.

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The pivot happened when Peter reported to the church leaders in Jerusalem all that he had done and seen. Peter's work at spreading the good news about Jesus had gone before him.

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The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.

It was buzzing around the whole area surrounding Jerusalem that the Gentiles were coming to God. The non-Jewish people from all over the world were coming to faith.

This must have been great news. God has always wanted the Gentiles to come to him. God had chosen Israel to be a light to the nations, calling the nations back to himself through Israel. God had sent out the Jewish prophets to call the nations back to him. Like Jonah going to

Nineveh. God had performed miracles among the Gentiles—like Elijah raising the son of the widow of Zarephath. There was an entire courtyard around the Temple called the Court of the Gentiles, offering them space to pray and be in God's presence. The Court of the Gentiles is the area where Jesus turned the tables on the money lenders, in an effort to create space for the nations to come to God and pray.

And now the early church heard news that the Gentiles had received the word of God. They had accepted Jesus as their Saviour from sin. They had believed in his name and were joining the family of God. You could hear the wonder in people's voices. Is this really happening? Is this finally coming true in my lifetime? Am I witnessing this long-promised, long-hoped-for experience?

Yes, it was true. Peter went to Jerusalem to report this awesome news. Not only was he able to reveal the power of Jesus in the healing of the paralytic in Lydda and the raising of the dead woman in Joppa. But the big news is that Cornelius the Roman centurion has come to faith in Jesus and has received the Holy Spirit just the Apostles had at Pentecost. The Gentiles were joining in on what Jesus was creating. This is all happening! The world is changing. Christ's resurrection is transforming the whole world!

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And yet, this amazing moment also led to conflict. Sir Isaac Newton's Third Law of Motion states that, "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." And that is true in this moment as well. Verses 2 & 3

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So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."

To our ears today, this sounds preposterous. What are they getting at here, criticizing Peter about who he's eating with. "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." They weren't critical of Peter for preaching the gospel to them. They didn't criticize him that the Gentiles were receiving the word of God. Neither did they celebrate the amazing things that were going on all around them.

Everything stood still at the accusation that Peter had entered the house of a Gentile and had eaten with them. You could hear the giant thud in Peter's heart when he heard this criticism. What? All this is happening and your first response is to charge me with breaking the law of Moses?

But while we may not feel the full impact of this situation, we have to realize what is at stake here. It is a matter of identity. Who are we, and who is part of us?

This was a hard moment because the early Christians had come out of a strict Jewish background. These early Jewish believers had been spiritually formed in a religious context in which they just didn't mix with Gentiles. After all, the Gentiles did not practice Jewish purity laws so they were considered impure before God. Gentiles were pagans. They ate impure

foods, they worshipped idols and ate the food sacrificed to idols. The leaders in Jerusalem had been taught for generations that if they came into contact with a Gentile, they would be impure, and that until they did the ritual bathing, they couldn't worship in the temple or participate in sabbath observances, or even enter their own home lest family members get polluted, too. Better to stay far away and never come into contact with them. Certainly, don't enter their homes, which would be seen as a cesspool of impurity. And to eat with them is to share their very lives, which would be off the scale for disobedience. Even among the God-fearing Gentiles, the most kind-hearted, lovely ones, a Jewish believer could only come so close.

Those who called Peter on the carpet are called "circumcised believers." These were Christians who not only wanted to maintain their Jewish roots but they wanted others to conform to their traditional practices. They insisted Gentiles could only join the church and worship the Jewish Messiah if they became Jews by being circumcised and following Jewish laws. After all, Jesus had come to the Jewish people, and Christianity had started as an exclusively Jewish faith. This is who we are: Jewish followers of Jesus. Anyone who joins us in following Jesus must become a Jewish follower of Jesus, keeping the Jewish laws. So no wonder they hauled Peter on the carpet. He had crossed a boundary. This is not who we are.

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They weren't wrong. Peter had indeed broken a serious taboo. But Peter had a solid, indisputable answer to it. In most of the rest of our passage, Peter gives a careful, deliberate, step-by-step recap of what happened in Chapter 10 with Cornelius the Roman centurion.

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Peter starts by telling of his vision. Three times God had told him not to call impure what God has made clean. Three times Peter said no to this—revealing how closely he believed the same things as his critics. Then the appearance of three men directly after the vision. And yes, he did go into the home of a Gentile. And yes, he did eat with them.

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But what he saw happen in that home was revolutionary. The Holy Spirit had descended upon them like the Spirit had descended upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost. And then he remembered Jesus words about how the presence of the Holy Spirit is a sign of someone who follows Jesus. Then he spoke the words that no one could argue against:

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So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?"

The key point of his defense is that God told him to do it, he did it, and God showed up in a powerful way. What could you possibly say against that?

God was disrupting things. God was breaking new ground in this world through the power of his Holy Spirit. No longer could the church hold on to the old ways. God was showing them they had to move forward. God was changing the rules of the relationship. He clearly was showing the church that his salvation extends beyond the Jewish people to include the Gentiles without requiring them to first become Jews.

This caused a huge stir. Yet they were able to accept it. After the accusation and then the defense, we have the positive verdict.

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When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life."

What a great response. The critics were satisfied with the answer and the two sides came together. They gave praise to God for such a powerful salvation that extends the furthest reaches of humanity.

This was a conflict between people who were all new to this new movement of God. They expected there to be strong lines of continuity between the old ways and the new ways. They held each other accountable to this way. Yet they were open enough to recognize God on the move when they saw it. Peter was first, and the leaders in Jerusalem came along when Peter explained himself.

They got it right this time. They came to agreement. They recognized that believers in Jesus have an identity in this world that is different than they first thought. As followers of Jesus we are an expansive people. We now embrace as brothers and sisters all those who call on the name of Jesus and do not require them to change their ways. There can be Jewish Christians and Roman Christians and Ethiopian Christians and any kind of Christian. The only identifying marker is that they believe that God saves them by grace through the resurrection power of Jesus.

This was a monumental moment in the life of the church. It took a while to take hold. It wasn't suddenly something everyone believed. As one commentator puts it:

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We should not take verse 18 to imply that the church in Jerusalem forthwith entered zealously into a mission to Gentiles; indeed it never seems to have done so, and as a result it lost its importance over time. - I. Howard Marshall

It seems the Jerusalem leaders got it right this time, but later they caused a great deal of trouble in the early church. Later, Paul will find them so wearisome he will call them mutilators of the flesh (Philippians 3:2) and declare they should just go all the way and castrate themselves (Galatians 5:12). But here at the first time we meet them, they were tough, but they gave in. They agreed with Peter: who are we to think that we could stand in God's way?

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The upshot of all of it is this: If God is on the move, God's people should recognize it. Peter's words are as true for us today as when he said them: "How could I possibly hinder God?"

Ask yourself that same question: How could I possibly hinder God? How could I possibly try to stand in the way of what God is doing?

In one of his messages, Pastor Matt McCraw says

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The reality is, God can do amazing things in our lives, but we sometimes have a spirit of resistance to what God is doing. Similarly, God is sometimes doing amazing things through churches, but some of the people from within that very church have a spirit of resistance to what God is doing. So, ask yourself this week if you are opposing the work of God.

- Matt McCraw

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If God is stirring in people's hearts, moving them to salvation, even if it is the most unlikely of people, we need to be open to it. If God is shattering old ways and doing new things, do not be afraid. Talk about it, don't shy away from conflict about it, but engage with each other. We have the tools to discern these things. Old orthodoxies fall. The Holy Spirit keeps changing our minds, even when our minds have been shaped by generations of thinking in a certain way. Our continuing calling is to recognize God's call and God's work and keep in step with where the Spirit is leading.

The church sometimes needs to pivot. Where is God at work in such a clear way that you need to reevaluate. How is God challenging us to remember who we are in Christ? Our mission is always the same: to be his body that is open to all who call on the name of Jesus as their Saviour. Let us be open to new ways in which the Spirit is working in our times and our culture.

Amen

Saving God, we praise you for your grace. Your resurrection sets us free. Your Spirit is reaching out to the whole world and drawing people from all nations, peoples, languages, and tribes to you. We thank you for your far-reaching grace that has drawn us to you and the new life you give. We thank you that we can be part of your renewing work.