



## Christ United Methodist Church

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**Date:** May 19, 2019

**Sermon:** Can We Question God's Grace?

**Text:** Acts 11:1-18

**Speaker:** Pastor Don Archer

I have always been fascinated by the stories recorded for us in the Book of Acts. It is a record of the work, the ministry of the early church. It is a very honest, sometimes unflattering, look at the challenges that the early leaders faced. Incredibly, there are portions of The Acts of the Apostles that are so very relevant, so very similar, to issues and questions that we wrestle with even today. This morning's reading from Acts chapter 11 is such a text.

It is important for us to remember that first disciples of Jesus were Jews. Therefore, the early leadership of the church was based in Jewish tradition and scripture. For a period, following the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, his disciples were, essentially a cult, another break-away group from Jewish orthodoxy.

Things were initially going very well for the early church ... then this pesky Holy Spirit got involved. The spirit of God began to move among **non-Jewish** people ... Gentiles. (Don't you hate it when that happens!) The first Christians had built a tree house and posted a sign on the door: 'No Girls Allowed.' It seems that God is restrained or limited by signs.

Soon, those who were not allowed were given a rope or a ladder and the secret password was revealed to them. Now what! They have access AND they know the password, how can we keep them out?

Gentiles were being drawn to the message and the ministry of Jesus, the Risen Lord. This was a real problem. Why? Because, as I mentioned earlier, the first disciples were Jews and assumed that the promise of the Messiah was only for them. Not for the heathen. Not for the uncircumcised. They had scripture on their side. The scriptures made it clear that only circumcised people could be sons and daughters of Abraham, benefactors of the covenant. Gentiles and others were not permitted full access to the temple in Jerusalem. They were restricted, as were many others, to the cheap seats. On the outside, looking in. These rules were clearly laid out in the scriptures. Leviticus, Deuteronomy ...

But there were these people in Caesarea, who had seen an angel and the angel told them to send for Simon Peter, who was in Joppa. *"... he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved."*

About the same time that this angel appeared, SP had a vision. In this vision something like a sheet was lowered from heaven. On this sheet were all kind of unclean creatures. Unclean, meaning they

were forbidden for Jewish people to eat. Again, this was in keeping with the law, the scriptures. A voice told Peter to kill and eat these creatures. He refused, because he was a faithful Jew. *By no means*. He said. *For nothing profane has ever entered my mouth*. The voice from heaven said to him: *What God has made clean, you must not call profane*. This happened three times and then the buffet was pulled up to heaven.

At that very moment, three men from Caesarea, came to retrieve SP and asked that he come with them.

Listen carefully to what happened next. SP reports: *The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction **between them and us***.

SP went to Caesarea, as he began to speak, to share the message of God's saving grace in Jesus, the Holy Spirit fell upon the people in that house, just as it had upon the disciples on the Day of Pentecost!! SP had an epiphany. *If God gave them (gentiles) the same spirit that he gave us (Jews) when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, **who was I that I could hinder God?***

It is no secret that the church, the church in general and our denomination in particular is in decline. Attendance at protestant and catholic congregations is down. The same is true for Jewish synagogues. There are undoubtedly many reasons/explanations for this. The easy thing to do is to blame this younger generation. *They don't have the same values and level of commitment that we do*. I don't believe that for one minute! What I do believe is that too often whenever the Holy Spirit begins to work in someone's life, and that person begins to explore what the Christian life is all about, and who this person, Jesus, is ... they run into signs that read: *No Girls Allowed. No people with tattoos allowed. No one with inappropriate attire allowed. No one ... not like us.. like me ... allowed*.

It happens. Hopefully it is not intentional, but it happens. We point to scripture and say: you are not welcome. Just like SP and the other Jewish Apostles. Scripture says that I shouldn't eat with uncircumcised people. Their food is unholy, defiled. The uncircumcised are not part of our covenant. Keep Out!

We have, as SP had, a choice to make. Is God limited to the words of scripture or is God greater than even the Sacred Texts? The scriptures were clear. Do not eat unclean food. But the voice from heaven was also clear. *What God has made clean, you must not call profane*. The Law was clear. Jewish people were not to share meals or have direct contact with Gentile people. But THE SPIRIT told SP: *do not make a distinction between them and us*. It is very tempting to try and control the work of the Holy Spirit. To try and regulate where/when/how it moves and works. Jesus said that, like the wind, it goes where it pleases. Whenever we try to put restraints on God's grace, we are trying to *hinder God*.

The sacrament of baptism reminds us that the kingdom of God is really open to everyone and anyone. Even a child, only a few days old. A baby incapable of speech, uninterested in anything beyond eating, sleeping, and that other business, is as welcome to God's grace as anyone else. Because grace is a gift unearned. It is at work even before we are born. Our calling is to embrace it, not to limit it.

Jesus came to lower the rope from the tree house and to change the sign on the door. *In the name of Jesus Christ, you are always welcome.*

Amen.