

Easter 5C  
Acts 11:1-18  
May 18, 2025

*“Making Space”*  
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*Now the apostles and the brothers and sisters 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 was given to 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.”*

How many of you are familiar with the story we just heard from the book of Acts? It's not one we typically hear on Sunday mornings. And there's a reason for that. It mentions some things that make us feel uncomfortable. When I was a kid, it was expected that I would spend some time each day reading the Bible. I assumed that since the Bible was, well, the BIBLE, it was okay to talk about or ask about anything I read in it. I'm not sure why I waited until my folks were hosting a group of their friends to ask this particular question. Maybe I had simply forgotten until an 'opportune' time, but I blurted out suddenly, "Dad, what's circumcision?" It was as if all the air was suddenly sucked out of the room. My dad excused himself and led me to another room to answer my question. But the fact that everyone had gone silent and we had to talk elsewhere signaled to me that this question was inappropriate and had made people uncomfortable. I'm guessing it still does. And that's not all.

We're also confronted in this text by Peter's strange vision of a heavenly tablecloth being lowered down in front of him. Instead of Kosher delights ready for eating, the tablecloth writhed and wriggled with live animals—the kind Peter knew were not meant for eating. But then a voice commanded, "kill and eat." This too makes us uncomfortable and not just because we find the idea of eating a snake or a lizard or any animal, for that matter, to be off-putting. It's uncomfortable because food doesn't come from magic table cloths filled with living animals. Food comes from grocery stores! It comes fully prepared and packaged for us to take home and cook or reheat. There are no animals involved. Or so we could easily believe, if we didn't know better.

So there are a couple of things in this text we'd rather not think about and certainly would rather not talk about and perhaps that's why it's unpopular with preachers. The truth is, though, this episode isn't really about the animals or the magic table cloth or circumcision, this text is about something else entirely. It's about determining who's in and who's out.

The text begins with Peter explaining that a man named Cornelius had sent for him in order to hear a message that would save his family. Peter

went to the man, met his friends and family, ate at his table, and preached to them. We're told that while Peter was still preaching, Cornelius and his family were filled with God's spirit and Peter baptized all of them. But not everyone was initially excited by the new converts. We learn that some of the faithful in Jerusalem believed that it wasn't enough for Cornelius and his family to follow Jesus' way, they also needed to become like them—to become Jewish in order to become Christian. But, as Peter pointed out, God's spirit had already filled them up. It looked like they were in whether the others were on board or not.

Lest we be too hasty to judge the Jerusalem believers, it's worth pointing out that humans seem to love entrance exams, love testing one another, love demanding fealty before we bestow the rights and privileges of membership on someone new. We tend to want to make absolutely sure someone knows they're an outsider before we deign to allow them into the group. Am I right? But Peter and the others learned that it was to be different in their group, in the Jesus group, in the Kingdom of God. No more entrance exams or barriers to membership. Just a wide open welcome and a willingness to follow the way of Jesus.

While I promise I didn't plan it this way, it's serendipity once again that on the Sunday we chose to celebrate new members, the lectionary prescribes a text about welcoming new folks into Christian community. I couldn't have planned it better if I tried!

In the Litany of Membership that we shared earlier, we reminded one another that the church is the assembly of people who are committed to living like Jesus in the world and committed to one another. We pledged to share our lives in the ministry of this church, and we covenanted with one another to share in worship, communion, and care, supporting this church through our giving and our service, while seeking the welfare of this congregation and our community, living and loving like Jesus as best we are able.

Our membership in this body is not founded upon a statement of faith, or a shared doctrinal position, or even a ritual. Congregationalists believe that covenant, the agreement we enter into together and the act of living out that agreement, is what constitutes a church. We are a church because we promise one another to be the church together. It is love for one another and commitment to Jesus' way that binds us. Not agreement. Not uniformity. We are not now and never will we be sheep. We are the church in this time and place because we want to be and because we're committed to being it together. Period. No other proofs required, hurdles to jump over or hoops to jump through, trials, tests, or exams. Because we know that our job is not to keep people out, not to tighten the circle, but to widen it and welcome people in, just like Jesus.

But there is a catch, our kind of church, this church, only works if we're truly a part of it – if we live the covenant we've proclaimed. The church is the people and it takes all of us to be the New England Church of this time and place. We have so much and so many to be grateful for. Let's be the church this city and this world needs right now. May it be so. Amen.