

Pastor's Message – 5/15/2022  
Acts 11:1-18

This is the third Sunday we have been travelling through the Book of Acts and today, I want to talk about how we have arrived here. How has the map given to us by God's Holy Spirit brought us to this place and where might we be going from here?

In last week's reading about Tabitha/Dorcas from chapter 9 we heard about Peter's role in the early church, and we're still talking about Peter today and how he helped the early church to be formed, shaped, and developed. Today a bombshell has gone off. Peter has made an executive decision and the Church Council has called him on the carpet.

In the previous chapter before today's reading, in chapter ten, a man in Caesarea, a Gentile centurion named Cornelius, experienced a vision in which an angel of the Lord urged him to summon Peter to come and visit him. When Peter got the invitation, he agreed to come. And that's where we pick things up today.

On his way to the city from Joppa, Peter stopped to pray and eat. During his stop, he fell into a trance in which he had a vision similar to the vision we read about in the text for today. As Peter was puzzling over what the vision meant, Cornelius' servant appeared to take him to see the centurion. So, the next day Peter went to Caesarea.

When Peter asked Cornelius why he had been summoned, Cornelius shared the vision he had experienced with Peter. Peter responded by witnessing about Jesus Christ and inviting Cornelius, a Gentile, to become a follower. As Peter was speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard him speak. Although the circumcised Jewish Christians among them were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, Peter invited them to be baptized. That is a radical change from what they believed and how they lived their lives. To this point, followers of Jesus had pretty much been limited to Jews. They were now off on a new direction and had no map to follow – or did they?

Some of you may be old enough to remember the road maps you used to pick up for free at gas stations. They're disappearing, and they certainly aren't free now. Used to be that when you'd get the family together for a long road trip; one of the parents (usually Dad, who refused to ask anyone for directions) would load up the glove box of the family station wagon with those fold-out paper maps -- you know, the kind that featured an oil company logo on the front and never folded back to its original configuration!

Dad would go down to the local gas station, and while the attendant filled up the car, checked the oil, put free air in the tires, and washed the windows, Dad would go inside and grab some free maps for the trip. If you were AAA members, though, Dad would most certainly have already ordered the TripTik, which gave him turn-by-turn directions and stamped-on warnings about construction that would cause Dad to want to leave at o-dark-thirty in order to "beat the traffic."

These days, though, you can hardly find a paper map at the gas and sip, and, even if you do, you'll have to pay for it after you pump your own gas, check your own oil, and find quarters to activate the air compressor. Then again, you probably don't need the map anyway because you have a GPS on the dashboard, or you know you can look up your current location on your smartphone. Even if you're off-road, a hand-held GPS can tell you

your current location within a couple of feet. With all that technology available to you, even if you're in the middle of nowhere, you can determine that you are at least somewhere.

Paper maps seem to be going the way of the cassette tape and the black-and-white TV, if you even remember those. If I would ask for a show of hands of who has maps in their cars right now, chances are that nobody under the age of fifty would have one. Many would say that we're at the point of simply not needing them anymore.

But are we there yet? Will paper maps someday be something we only see in museums? Well, not so fast, says Joel Minster, chief cartographer for Rand McNally, the nation's largest mapmaker: "I don't think paper maps are going anywhere, but people may be using them differently, more as a companion to the online or digital map." In fact, the paper map may be the only truly reliable full-time form of navigation.

The other reason why maps aren't going anywhere is that they provide one thing that GPS and online directions -- despite their colors, detail, and satellite imagery -- cannot: context. While a GPS can tell you where you are and what's immediately in front of you, it can't show you all the alternate routes, the possible shortcuts, the way to get around that traffic jam. It won't lay out the whole trip for you in one panoramic view (unless you relish trying to read fine print while driving at 70 mph). "Paper maps offer big-picture geometry," says Debra Turner, vice president of marketing for Compass Maps. "They can show you four or five counties, and not just the neighborhood you're driving in." Where a GPS chirps "Recalculating!" when you veer off the route, a paper map will quietly show you all the possible ways to get there that you may never have considered.

The apostles and disciples of Jesus, who were the earliest Christians, were originally Jews, and some of them, at least, continued to obey some of the stipulations of Jewish law. For example, Peter, in our text, had not before eaten any animals that were listed in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Leviticus and Numbers) as unclean (cf. Leviticus Ch. 11). So, no camels, geckos, monitor lizards, rabbits, pigs, buzzards, ostrich, donkey, zebra, hippopotamus, dogs, or even seafood like catfish, lobster, clams, squid, dolphin, whale, and others. In addition, these early Jewish Christians were circumcised, also according to Jewish law (cf. Genesis 17:9-14). As Gentiles began coming into the early church, the question therefore arose as to whether or not they too had to be circumcised and follow dietary laws.

The story of the early church, as told in the Book of Acts, is one that shows a church steadily moving in the direction toward becoming more inclusive. That's the map that the Holy Spirit seems to be unfolding for them. The crowds gathered on Pentecost, which we will celebrate one month from today, the day on which the Holy Spirit appeared like tongues of fire over the heads of the disciples, and which was a prelude and a hint of what was to come for the early church. It would soon be welcoming Samaritans, the Ethiopian official, and now gentile Cornelius and his household. Peter reports to the Jerusalem elders that this is the work of the Holy Spirit. Criticism of Peter gives way to praise of God.

Later on, the Apostle Paul would write that he was quite sure that following the Jewish law was no longer required of any Christians, because when Christians tried to follow the law, they were depending on themselves, whereas salvation depended entirely on faith in God's work in Jesus Christ. Thus, Paul's whole letter to the church at Galatia

strongly condemns those who insist on the necessity of keeping Judaism's law. "If anyone is preaching to you a different gospel," Paul writes, "let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:9).

It seems that Peter's vision is not really about unacceptable food; it is about unacceptable people. It is not about "unclean" food; it is rather about "unclean" people. Peter's vision is a word from God about who is welcome in God's church and who is not.

Our society and our churches and especially our United Methodist Church are experiencing some very damaging and painful and uncertain times right now – not that this is really anything new. We prayed earlier about the noise, distraction, clatter, and constant commotion that we live with – inside and outside. Sometimes it seems like even the messages from the church lead us down a road of confusion, despair, and destruction. But I think there is a word of hope and direction in our Bible reading for today – a road map of sorts to help us as the church, our Waupun United Methodist Church included, as it changes and faces an uncertain future.

The very first verse in our reading today is astonishing: "...Gentiles, non-Jews, had received the word of God! What does that mean? What do people who have received the word of God look like? How can you tell? That could mean almost anyone. How do we relate to people of all kinds?

Does that include pedophiles and sex offenders? Young people with tattoos and body piercings? Are we really called to welcome terrorists, prostitutes, and drug dealers? What about the man who smells bad? How do we make him feel welcome in church? Or the woman who has bedbugs on her clothing or lice in her hair?

And what about the person whose behavior is inappropriate or disruptive in the worship service, or the parents who refuse to control their rowdy children during the worship service, or anywhere for that matter? This passage could be about acceptance and welcome of LGBTQ persons or even female clergy.

Although the biblical writings suggest that women held significant positions in early Christianity, since the church began to develop, women have been refused certain leadership roles. Indeed, in the majority of Christian churches today, women are not allowed to preach or lead or teach men in the church. While Methodists began ordaining women in 1956, and women outnumber men in many of our seminaries today, it is clear that women continue to struggle for equality in the church and in society. Many of our brothers and sisters in the faith continue to insist that the Scriptures clearly limit the role that women can play in leading the church.

With that in mind, the historical welcoming attitude of the United Methodist Church and this Church is encouraging. For this Church, thankfully, as evidenced by the banners in the Gathering area, the issue is not that complicated. Hospitality, even radical hospitality, is part of who we are. It's in our DNA. But that doesn't make it easy. It has been a struggle for us ever since the infancy of the Christian movement, and it still is.

Whenever boundaries are broken, whenever the "other" is embraced by the church, then that is, our Bible reading today suggests, "from heaven." Someone has obeyed the vision. It is an act of God, miraculous. The church itself is a miracle, a kind of protest against the way the world gathered people.

In the world, “like attracts like.” The church is whomever Jesus Christ calls to himself. In the world, we gather mainly on the basis of affinity, on the basis of similar racial, economic, education, or other world unifying characteristics. The church is a miracle, an act of God.

Our Bible reading from the Book of Acts today tells us that God is in charge of who gets in and who doesn't. The distinctions we create are irrelevant to God. God's invitation and welcome are for all.

In verse seventeen, Peter says, “[And} since God gave these Gentiles the same gift he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to stand in God's way?” God invited Peter to unfold a much larger map that reveals a world of possibilities for people of all kinds, united around the singular direction of God's grace and God's salvation desire in the world.

God was laying out a new route that would bring Jews and others together: God, in fact, doesn't just give Peter the map but also the direction of the Spirit to go with the Gentile guides to Caesarea (v. 11-12). Because Peter marches off the old route, he begins to see how God's plan for the whole world is unfolding like a huge gas station map.

Cornelius had also received a vision from God, which altered his map as a Roman centurion and citizen who likely had seen a lot of the world. The Holy Spirit sent Peter, a Jew, and Cornelius, a Gentile, off their prescribed routes to meet each other as an example of the new route God was showing the church. No longer would Jews and Gentiles run separate paths, but they would serve the same Lord as part of the same church. As Peter put it, "I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'"

In the 300's B.C., Alexander the Great ran off an unprecedented string of victories that opened the way for his army to travel from Asia Minor through Persia and into Afghanistan. His generals came to him one day and informed him: "We don't know what to do next. We have marched off the map."

This is the critical moment of decision, and it doesn't happen only to world conquerors. Frequently, in life, bold and adventuresome people come across situations in which there is no precedent to guide them. In such times we are faced with two choices: turn around and return to the security of what we already know. Or forge ahead, marching off the map.

How do we continue to look like a welcoming Congregation and even become more welcoming – inviting and being open to all who hear the call of God and the Holy Spirit? How do we make people feel wanted and loved? Is our hospitality an open, enthusiastic, generous, and even radical one? Or is ours a timid, fearful, and cautious hospitality? The question of inclusiveness continues to be a challenge for us 2,000 years after Peter first testified before that first church council in Jerusalem.

The Holy Spirit breaks open the church of Jesus to move in new ways. How and where we set boundaries in Christian community is always subject to the gracious nature of God's love. Our reading from Act today offers a reminder of a new vision that the early church wrestled with for God's people. Where the Spirit leads, the church is called to follow in love.