**Acts 11:1-18 (ESV)**

**1** Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. **2** So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, **3**  “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.” **4** But Peter began and explained it to them in order: **5**  “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. **6** Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. **7** And I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ **8** But I said, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ **9** But the voice answered a second time from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, do not call common.’ **10** This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. **11** And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. **12** And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. **13** And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; **14**  he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.’ **15** As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. **16** And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ **17** If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” **18** When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

**“A Puzzle of Love Not So Puzzling”**

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. There is a perfect picture of a new heavens and a new earth on the Last Day brought by the risen Jesus. However, many things in this old creation still show great division and strife. The secular world makes us uncomfortable. It goes about mixing all kinds of cultures, languages and people together. Many have questions over where this is all going as boundaries keep breaking down. At the same time, the baptized already know what arose out of the death and resurrection of God’s Son. He shook the foundations of life. If forgiveness is for a sinful world, then Christ as Savior gave a whole new relationship between God and man by the Gospel.

How do you picture the earliest church? Did it all just start out without any hang-ups? Was there any issues or were these saints immune to matters we poor sinners face today? The book of Acts uncovers repeatedly how Jesus tore down old boundaries. God’s grace mixed up the relations between Jews and Gentiles. Rather than being exclusive, all were included in the invitation of savlation. There was only one basis and it rested not in circumcision, family lines, or heritage but in those words, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.” This is repentance not in earning salvation or a sinless life, but turning in faith to the Savior for forgiveness, life, and salvation. God’s love and promise goes out to all and His Spirit binds believers together in Jesus Christ.’

We may be skeptical or harsh to others outside of our circles. This is how the Jewish Christian acted at first. They had heard what was going on among the Gentiles with the Gospel. “So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.” It was hard not to see the boundary laid out in the Old Testament between Israel and all others. The distinction was evident in the flesh of a man since the time of Abraham. Likewise, eating with Gentiles only made a person unclean according to ceremonial law. Peter had crossed the line of what was comfortable for these Jewish Christians. It questioned the Mosaic Law for their life and who they were now mixed in with these Gentiles as God’s people in Jesus Christ.

Our blindness can do the same thing today. The heart of confessing our sins to God is to declare, “We have not loved You with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves.” Of course, neighbor extends far beyond our inner circle of relationships. God includes the strangers, outcasts, and many others. The secular world has mixed it up, but the fact is racism remains. It is a belief system hidden in our sinful flesh. It is to look at another person as inferior… “because of apparent biological, cultural, ethnic, or national difference” (Racism and Church CTCR 18). You can see it in cities with segregated parts of town. It is what also generates talk about “those people” moving in a small town. This happens at church when we say, “Where are all the young people?” Yet, the tougher fact remains that 95% of us in Missouri Synod are white. In other words, we fail at welcoming people because sinful suspicions make us miss what God sees.

Nothing blinds God for His plan is to include all people to hear the good news. This is what Peter held out as a preacher of the Word. As the early Church Father Gregory the Great remarks, “But, had he said anything of his own power in answer to the complaint of the believers, he would not have been truly a teacher of gentleness. He pacified them, therefore by giving a reason humbly, and even produced witnesses to defend him from blame…” (ACC). Peter held out a miraculous vision where the Lord said to him, “What God has made clean do not call common.” If food was clean to eat, how much more did were men by the sacrifice of Christ! Again, at the request of his presence to visit the gentile Cornelius, “the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction.” All barriers broke down in bringing Christ as Savior. Finally, Peter was only an instrument stating, “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’” The Word worked faith in Jew and Gentile alike in spite of the apparent differences.

God’s plan is still to include the nations and all people. This runs along lines opposite a secular worldview. Laws can only turn into more suppression. No laws can only degrade into lawlessness. Love ends up being in the image of man rather than the image of Christ as God and Man for sinners. The Father has revealed truth and love by sending His Son. How much the Psalms of the Old Testament proclaim this promise saying, “The Lord has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations” (Psalms 98:2). The Holy Spirit is now at work throughout a sinful world because Jesus has won salvation. How do we recognize this Spirit? Not by a people, culture, or language but in what Jesus said about the Spirit, “He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” This is what comes by Word and Sacrament since Jesus has paid the price for all. Repentance is to believe in the gift God gives freely unto the nations for forgiveness, life, and salvation. As St. John said, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.” There is no liquidating of cultures, but all can call upon the Name of the Lord and be saved.

Faith in Christ is an exclusive Word and Spirit in His Church. Since all races face sinful death and fall short of fulfilling the Law. God calls forth a new kind of people in Christ. The Spirit is at work in water as promised by the Word. As Peter concluded, “If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” This is true for infants as for adults. It remains true between the races of people. It is what stands true for the lawful and lawless. All come to the same faith as worked by God’s Spirit through His Word. Luther declares, “Therefore a man becomes a Christian, not by working but by listening. And so anyone who wants to exert himself toward righteousness must first exert himself in listening to the Gospel. Now when he has heard and accepted this, let him joyfully give thanks to God, and then let him exert himself in good works that are commanded in the Law…Then he will be able to walk safely in the light that is Christ;”[[1]](#footnote-1)

After Peter spoke, those questioning him did not stand in the way. “When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.” Repentance is the fruit of faith. It turns all from false idols to the only true God sent for sinners. Jesus saved the Jewish Christians from the Law of works by their hands just as He saved the Gentile Christian by His hand of grace at work for them. The Lord’s Supper gives strength and hope to listen to Him in every culture. Those who communion together no longer can call each other common. Jesus says, “Behold, I am making all things new.” What a new heaven and a new earth it will be with all kinds of people! Among the changes of this world, we pray our hearts may be fixed where these true joys are found. God’s love and promise goes out to all and His Spirit binds believers together in Jesus Christ. Amen. Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting, Amen.

1. Luther, M. (1999, c1963). *Vol. 26*: *Luther's works, vol. 26 : Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (Ga 3:3). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)