



One Page Sermon

By Pastor Robb McCoy

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“Who am I to stand in the way?”

Recap of Sermon from 4/23/23 by Robb McCoy
Scripture: Acts 11:1-18

The classic TV sitcom *I Love Lucy* had a well-worn formula. Best friends Lucy and Ethel would come up with great schemes behind the back of their husbands Ricky and Fred. Often these schemes were trying to get Lucy to get noticed as a performer. Sometimes however, it was just a series of misfortunes and ensuing cover-ups to avoid getting into trouble. Inevitably, they would get caught and it seemed like most weeks Ricky would say to Lucy, “Lucy, you have some explaining to do.”

In this passage we don’t read about Lucy and Ethel getting into comical hijinks. Instead, we have Peter and Cornelius doing things that the apostles wouldn’t approve of. Rumors have spread in Jerusalem among the apostles that Gentiles are receiving the good news. When Peter gets back in front of the apostles, he has some explaining to do.

It turns out that the Holy Spirit has been running amok, and Peter has to explain how it all happened. First however, we need to consider how big of a deal this really is. Peter is accused of eating unclean food with unclean people. This is no small thing.

For some context, we can consult 2 Maccabees 6:18-31. In this story, Athanasius, the foreign king who ruled over Jerusalem, conducted a systemic persecution of the Jews. He committed many atrocities. He polluted the Temple, calling it a temple of Zeus. He sacrificed unclean animals on the altar and scattered pig’s blood on the Torah. In 18-31, we read of a man named Eleazar, an important scribe, who was captured and forced to eat swine. He refused, and for his refusal he was flogged. Later, he was given a chance to bring his own meat, which could be whatever he wanted, but could say that it is pig to save face.

Again, he refused, for fear of the influence this might have over younger people. As a response to his refusal to eat anything unclean, or even to pretend to eat something unclean, he was flogged to death. This brutal killing of Eleazar is an important reminder of how seriously the Jewish people took the cleanliness laws. Peter wasn’t just having a “cheat day,” as if he was following a low-carb diet.

To eat something unclean and to eat with people who were unclean was a serious break from custom, tradition, and strikes at the very essence of his identity. Yet he was being accused of breaking these laws by eating with Cornelius and other uncircumcised believers. Truly, Peter had some explaining to do.

And his explanation was simple: He had a vision of God that he could do this. He then had an encounter with Cornelius himself, and saw that Cornelius was righteous despite his Gentile status. Finally, he witnessed the Holy Spirit act in powerful ways in and through

these Gentiles.

Peter testified to 1. His own spiritual awakening, 2. The relationship he had built with Cornelius, and 3. The evidence of the Holy Spirit in these other people. Peter said, (my paraphrase) “This wasn’t my idea, this is the Holy Spirit. Who are we to question it?”

Peter did not come up with some liberal agenda. He wasn’t following some left-wing conspiracy. He wasn’t even following his own heart. He was following the Holy Spirit, and he comes to the radical conclusion, “If God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, then who am I? Could I stand in God’s way?” (Acts 11:17)

The answer he concludes, and the rest of the apostles reluctantly come to is, no. The Church should not stand in the way of what the Holy Spirit is doing.

And this, my friends, is the heart of what we have been doing as a church in our Reconciling Conversations. This is the heart for working for a more inclusive church. Some may believe that we have some explaining to do. And this is our story: The Holy Spirit has given many Elders, Deacons, lay people, leaders, and teachers a vision. It is a vision of a sheet that includes all animals and the voice of God that says, “Eat.” It is a vision of a Church that includes all people. It is a vision that sets aside our institutional, cultural, and artificial boundaries, even ones marked by race, class, gender, and orientation.

Beyond the vision, the Holy Spirit has opened pathways to new relationships. Like the Holy Spirit pushed Cornelius and Peter into a courageous act of mutuality and hospitality. We have met, connected with, worshipped, prayed, learned, preached and shared with people who may be shocking to some. I have connected with LGBTQ+ people who have been touched by the Spirit. We have witnessed breathtaking acts of hospitality, courage, mission, and grace. We have seen the Holy Spirit work in and through LGBTQ+ people. And if you have not witnessed this, then we are asking that you trust us, like the Jerusalem Council trusted Peter.

Inclusion in the Church is not a liberal agenda. It is not a left-wing conspiracy. It is not coming from our own hearts. Inclusion is not the Church bending to the will of secular culture. LGBTQ+ people have been a part of the Jesus movement from the beginning. They have followed the Way of Christ. They have received the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is, and always has been, inclusive of Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. It took time for Peter to understand that, but he learned. It is taking time for the Church to understand that, but I cannot help but wonder, “If God gave LGBTQ+ people the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, then who are we? Should we stand in God’s way?”

Next Sunday: Acts 13:1-3, 14:8-18, Paul begins the mission to the Gentiles, with mixed results.