

Gracious God, May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

It is a great privilege to be here with you this morning at First Presbyterian Church, celebrating World Communion Sunday and reflecting on God's Word to us from scripture. Thank you for your warm and generous hospitality. It is humbling, isn't it, to join Christians from around the world who are gathering this very day to worship God in praise and glory.

I will tell you that the sermon today is not the one I thought I was going to preach earlier in the week. It's funny how that happens, but as the week progressed, I felt led in a different direction than the one I had originally envisioned in my head.

On Thursday this week I joined faith-based and non-profit leaders in Charlotte to address the ongoing devastation caused by Hurricane Helene, particularly in the Western part of North Carolina. The stories of loss, of devastation, displacement, scarce resources, continue to be heartbreaking. The varied needs are great at this time, as we all know!

The Thursday meeting was a call to action – a call to mobilize so that critical resources could be delivered to the people and places that need it the most.

The church is called in moments like this to be on the move, helping in a variety of ways, through the offering of donations, gifts, time, energy and prayer that allow those who are able to travel across boundaries to the communities that are most in need.

So, as I engaged with Scripture this week, I was struck by the reality that the people of God have always been on the move. When we turn to the story of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, it is clear that God's people are on the move. God hears the cries of the people in Egypt, leading them into the wilderness and on to the promised land. God's people have always, it seems, been on the move.

When we get to the opening of the Book of Acts, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, but prior to his ascension, it may seem like the call to be on the move is finally over. If we imagine the story of Acts being played out on a stage in front of us, we would be struck by the fact that the opening scenes all take place in Jerusalem, and the entire cast of characters is Jewish! In fact, in the opening verses, the disciples are instructed NOT to leave Jerusalem, and they ask excitedly, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' The answer is a bit of a giveaway as to how the story will unfold, for Jesus answers, "You will receive the power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1: 8)

Take a breath, wait for the Holy Spirit, and you will be on the move again. The book of Acts may begin in Jerusalem, but it will not end there. It will end with Paul in Rome, and so the chapters of Acts tell us the story of that movement, from Jerusalem to Rome and the surrounding world. God's people on the move!

Solomon’s temple, the grand, mighty fixed abode, the great fortress, will soon be destroyed, and the disciples of Jesus will become mobile dwellers. Abraham’s tent rather than Solomon’s temple will be a better image for Christians who are on the move, exposed to the elements, and ready to be set up quickly anywhere the Spirit will lead.

In our scripture passage this morning, we find the story of Peter’s encounter with the household of the Roman Centurian, Cornelius. This story is mentioned three times by the author of Acts, which suggests a divine nudge to pay attention. This third telling of the story takes place in Jerusalem, and is a story of crossing boundaries. It’s the story of Peter crossing the threshold into a gentile household, led by God’s spirit. At the start of chapter 11, when Peter enters Jerusalem, the naysayers have heard on the grapevine that the *Gentiles* have **also** accepted the word of God. They jeer him: “**Peter! Why did you go to the uncircumcised and eat with them?**” There’s always a few naysayers, aren’t there?

Peter’s response to the naysayers is to tell them the story of what *God had done* in the midst of his and his companions’ travels. He recounts his earlier vision, received whilst praying in the city of Joppa, of a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners. He sees four footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles and birds of the air. The voice from heaven tells Peter to “get up, kill, and eat.” Peter replies to God, “By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered into my mouth.” The voice from heaven speaks again: “What God has made clean, you **must not** call profane.” This back and forth went on three times until Peter, still greatly puzzled, interprets the vision in a way that has enormous significance for the emerging church’s understanding of itself.

So why would a dazed and confused Peter accept an invitation to Cornelius’s house in Caesarea, one that required him to cross forbidden boundaries, knowing it was unlawful for a Jew to associate with a Gentile? He declares that the **Spirit** of God told him to accept the invitation and travel to the house of Cornelius. This is a *boundary crossing* story, as Peter journeys from the familiar to the unknown, likely with much trepidation and uncertainty. A boundary crossing journey led by the Holy Spirit. Peter declares: “God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean...I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.” (Acts 10: 28-29) To the naysayers in Jerusalem, Peter asks: “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit *just as we have?*”

And when they heard the story, they were silenced, and then they *praised God*, saying, “God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

Scholars Bevans and Schroeder tell us that this kind of story would have been *inconceivable* to the apostles as they gathered in Jerusalem in chapter 1. Something remarkable is happening, and it’s not what anyone would have anticipated. Followers of Jesus are on the move, journeying across boundaries, and then returning to share *where* God is leading, and what God is *doing* in the world.

I agree with missionary Lesslie Newbigin that this is not merely a story of the conversion of Cornelius and his household, but also of Peter and his companions, *and* it’s a story of the *ongoing conversion* of the emerging

church, as they begin to digest and process the significance of God’s work in the world. And it’s a call for us to be a part of the movement of God, following the Spirit’s lead, sharing good news, and returning to share the story with others, that they may be amazed at what God is doing.

We are aware this morning that so many worshipping communities are facing incredibly difficult challenges – those worshipping in the aftermath of devastating storm damage or bracing for the next weather system coming through. Those communities worshipping in the context of historical and ongoing war, violence, threat, persecution, oppression, fear, lack of resources, or insecurity.

Today is an opportunity to worship alongside and in solidarity with those around a world who are faithfully on the move to share God’s love in the midst of deep division and brokenness.

How, then, might this passage apply to us today? Where are the boundary lines drawn in our communities? Where are the boundary lines that we rarely cross? And where are the boundaries that the naysayers tell us we should never cross? You know the ones, those defined by political, racial, cultural national, ideological, economic, or religious identity? Those boundaries that have walls of separation that appear insurmountable. And how open are we to journeying over these boundaries in response to the Spirit’s leading. For the spirit of God goes with us and before us, dismantling human made walls of division, that the reconciling good news of Christ may be shared in joy, that all may have the fulness of life together.

This morning, we share the sacrament of communion, joining with Christians all over the world in receiving physical and spiritual nourishment from this meal. It is this nourishment from which we draw strength to cross boundaries, into our shattered communities, to bring good news, the hope of reconciliation, healing, care, supplies, and solidarity for those whose lives are tired and broken. We eat and drink so that we have all we need to leave this place and **go**, where the Spirit will lead us, into a world that is desperate for good news.

And so, siblings in Christ, be on the lookout for where God might be leading you. Then come back, sharing what you have seen God doing in your midst, that we may all be enriched, giving all thanks and praise to God.

Amen.

And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of our Creator God, and the Spirit of God who leads us into the world, be with you this day, and evermore. Amen.