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Acts 11:1-18 – *Expecting What We Least Expect*

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Acts 11:1-18

The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him ³ and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

⁴ Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: ⁵ “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. ⁶ I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. ⁷ Then I heard a voice telling me, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’

⁸ “I replied, ‘Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’

⁹ “The voice spoke from heaven a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ ¹⁰ This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.

¹¹ “Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. ¹² The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³ He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. ¹⁴ He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.’

¹⁵ “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. ¹⁶ Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷ So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?”

¹⁸ When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

Has anyone here been to Hawaii?

If you've never been...

I bet you have expectations around what it would be like:

Warm, tropical, pineapples, laying in the sun, snorkeling.

Those were my expectations for our trip a few years ago.

We planned a trip to Oahu—

Kristi and I before kids—

And set some really high expectations.

I think these expectations would have been met...

Had Kristi not gotten sick the day we left.

She had pneumonia the whole week we were there...

Which put a little damper on our trip.

Our expectations weren't met...

Which caused some big disappointments.

Have you ever heard of the saying:

“Expectations are premediated resentments”?

We set our expectations for how things should be way up here...

And when they don't happen...

Those high hopes turn into burning resentments.

The Jewish believers at Jerusalem had some resentments/disappointments coming to them.

They *expected* God to operate in a certain way...

Especially when it comes to salvation...

This precious gift of life.

People were saved through Jesus, they agreed...

But! they first had to pass through the waters of Judaism.

For all time...

The people of the Jewish faith were God's chosen people—

And if anyone wanted God's gift of life—

They first needed to be Jewish.

They had to eat like one (only kosher);

Look like one (circumcision)...

And act like one (associate only with Jews)...

Gentiles and Samaritans are strictly off-limits.

So, when these believers in Jerusalem hear reports of what's going on—

That Peter has been in the homes of Gentiles...Roman soldiers...

Eating food and sharing fellowship...

That Peter welcomed them into God's family—

You can bet that their blood started to boil.

“This is not what how God wants things done!”

“This is not God's plan!” (expectations)

And in their disappointment or resentment they respond...

They criticize Peter.

Instead of rejoicing at what God is doing—

Rejoicing that the Gentiles accept the word of God—

They drill Peter on his actions:

“Why did you go into their houses?”

“They're unclean!”

“Why did you eat with them?”

“How many meals did you have?!”

“Were the meals even kosher?!”

Just a few chapters later...

We see Jewish believers putting up barriers.

“Okay, Gentiles can come in...”

“But they have to be circumcised.” (cf. Acts 15)

Peter is tempted in that same way—

Thinking he knows for sure how God operates—
Until the Spirit comes down on the Gentiles.

And Peter says:

“Who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?”

“Who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?”

Have you ever asked yourself that question:

Where am I putting up walls to God’s work?

Where am I resisting God’s plan?

Where am I standing in God’s way?

Is there somewhere in life where I expect God to be working in a certain way—

But he’s not—

And I’m unwilling to accept that...

Actually fighting against it?

This morning we’re specifically talking about our neighbors...

Intentionally connecting with our neighbors.

So, think about your neighbors for a second...

What does your relationship with them look like?

What is God doing in that relationship?

Maybe the relationship has been well-established for years...

Toward the beginning you were intentional about reaching out to them...

You were excited about the prospect of being a blessing to them...

Maybe even sharing your faith life with them.

But it has been years now...

And you’ve settled into a comfortable routine...

Maybe you’ve lowered your expectations for what the Lord wants to do.

You’re content with the occasional wave or polite conversation...

No longer expecting God to do anything in their life through you.

Maybe your neighbors are a little rough around the edges...

Maybe they do things you don't approve of...

And you think, "No way."

"No way are they open to Christianity..."

"If I share Jesus Christ with them, they will laugh me all the way home..."

"There's no way the message would hit home."

Or, "I don't want anything to do with them."

So you've (unintentionally?) put up a barrier...

Determining not to bring it up...

Deciding that the Lord isn't interested in them...

And you're not interested in them.

Or maybe your neighbors aren't like you at all—

They wear different clothes;

Eat different foods;

Speak with different accents—

And you have no idea how to approach them...

Fear dominates your expectations...

Thinking that they're rooted in their own religion and beliefs...

And that they want nothing to do with you.

As we think about our neighbors...

Maybe it's not so much that we have the *wrong* expectations...

As it is that we have *no* expectations.

We do not expect God to do anything in them...

And especially not *through* us.

Well, this couldn't be further from the truth.

Because God's heart is to save the lost...

God's heart is to reach those we'd least expect...

Those we've given up on.
 God is bringing life to our neighbors...
 And he's doing it through us!
 In our passage, God brings in the Gentiles...
 The Gentiles!
 Those people the Jewish believers see regularly...
 But want nothing to do with.
 Those people who are impure and unclean...
 The pagans!
 They associate with Gentiles only when they have to...
 And definitely never have Gentiles over for dinner...
 Or accept their invitations to hang out.
 These are the people the Jewish believers least expect to be called into God's family.
 But God does what is on nobody's radar...
 By opening his arms to these outsiders.
 And, make no mistake, this is *God's* doing:
 First, he grants Cornelius a vision...
 An angel coming to him from God...
 Telling Cornelius to send for Peter.
 Then, God gives Peter a vision...
 Preparing Peter's heart to see that nothing is unclean...
 Not food and not those Gentiles God is calling.
 Then, God's Spirit tells Peter to go with Cornelius' men...
 "Don't hesitate...don't be afraid...go with them."
 And it's God who pours out his Holy Spirit on the Gentiles gathered in the house.
 God is orchestrating this whole encounter—
 This seminal event in the life of the church—
 This event that will change everything going forward...

Where outsiders become insiders...

Where once-despised neighbors are now brothers and sisters.

It flies right in the face of the Jewish believers' expectations.

It doesn't depend on ethnicity or outward signs like they thought...

Gentiles don't have to convert to Judaism...

Gentiles don't have to follow food laws or get circumcised.

What's needed then?

What happens where their expectations about how God operates are now flipped?

It's the message that Peter carries...

The message through which everyone will be saved...

Jews and Gentiles.

It's not recapped by Peter in this chapter...

But in the previous chapter it is crystal clear:

Jesus of Nazareth is God's anointed, full of the Holy Spirit...

And he lived among the people.

The Jews in Jerusalem kill him by hanging him on a tree...

But God raises him from the dead on the third day.

People see him after his resurrection...

People eat and drink with this once-dead now-alive man.

Jesus then commands his followers to preach to the people...

To witness to the people that Jesus is the judge of the living and the dead.

That everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins.

This is the way to salvation, the way to life!

Through the name of Jesus Christ...

Through his perfect life, sacrificial death, and life-giving resurrection.

It doesn't matter who you are or where you come from...

It doesn't matter how much money you have;

It doesn't matter what you've done in the past.

What matters is what Jesus did.

Peter testifies that Jesus died not just for Jewish believers...

But just as much for Gentile believers.

God's heart for the lost and broken is enormous...

God's heart beats for the outsider.

With this story...

We see the entire course of history changed...

We see the expectations of the church blown away.

God is bringing salvation to outsiders—

To our neighbors—

And God is using us to do it. (SLOW)

Set your expectations here:

God loves your neighbor...

God wants to be in relationship with your neighbor...

And, God is using you to make it happen.

God could have had the angel share the message of salvation with Cornelius...

But he chooses to use Peter.

God goes through all of this trouble of sending angels and visions...

Having people journey from one city to another...

Gathering in a house...

Debating and sharing the news with members of the church back in Jerusalem.

There was an easier way...

But God chooses to use the church.

God chooses to use his people to proclaim the message and share his love through Christ.

And this is exactly what he is doing in our lives today...

Using us—

Our position, influence, and relationships—

To bring those on the outside in.

So, how can we participate?

Here are a couple of postures that Peter takes.

See if one of them stands out...

Adopt one of these postures for the week.

First, be open to God working through you.

We didn't read it in our passage...

But before Cornelius and before Peter's vision...

We see something changing in Peter.

In Acts 9:43 we read that "Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon."

Tanners were off-limits...

They handled animal carcasses to make leather.

Associating with them could have made Peter ritually unclean.

Yet, we see something already happening in Peter...

He stays with the tanner for "some time."

It's a small detail in the story...

But it shows God preparing Peter for what's ahead...

And Peter's openness to it.

Is God wanting to work through you in a way you don't expect?

Maybe even in a way you don't want?

Are you noticing people or things that God is bringing into your life?

Is there a trend or pattern of what God is doing right now...

Preparing your heart for something?

Can you take a posture of openness to receiving it this week?

Second, adopt a posture of prayer.

For Peter, it all starts when he is in prayer in Joppa.

He doesn't ask for the vision...

He doesn't ask for the Lord to work in this way...

But Peter opens up space in his day for God to speak.

Is that true for you?

Do you have times of regular communication with God?

Do you spend time in prayer—

Asking for those things you need—

But also listening for when God wants to speak?

Maybe this week you to commit a 20-minute time of prayer each day...

Just to improve relationship and communication with God...

To see if he wants to speak anything into your life.

A third posture is one of obedience.

Peter doesn't know what's going on in this story...

The Lord doesn't say:

“Okay Peter, here's what I have planned...”

And then lay it out, step by step, what's going to happen.

No, we don't get the sense that Peter knows what's happening...

Until he is actually in the house with Cornelius and the other Gentiles.

Then a lightbulb turns on and Peter knows what to do.

Peter is simply willing to go where God is leading him.

When the Spirit tells Peter to follow Cornelius' men...

Peter follows.

Peter just keeps walking in step with God.

How are we doing with obedience?

When the Spirit nudges us to do something—

To go to our neighbor or invite them over or speak a word of encouragement—

Are we following the Spirit's nudge?

Are we willing to follow step after step...

Even though we don't know where exactly God is taking us?

A fourth posture we can take is a commitment to fellowship.

Peter stays with Cornelius a few days...

Sharing meals and fellowship.

This is where God deepens relationships...

Around the table.

Peter allows himself to be uncomfortable—

Eating in the home of Gentiles—

In order to bridge the gap.

Maybe this week we choose this posture of fellowship with our neighbor.

Maybe it's time to share a meal together again...

Maybe it's time to go on a walk together...

Or something that attempts to move the relationship into deeper intimacy.

It's not always comfortable—

And it's not always convenient—

But God works through table fellowship with neighbors.

The final posture I want to highlight is a commitment to the gospel.

Peter's life was changed through a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Jesus called Peter when he was a fisherman with nothing to offer to the Lord.

Peter promised to always be there for Jesus...

Only to deny him 3 times when Jesus needed him most.

Jesus came back and preached the good news to Peter...

I still love you.

You're one of my people.

I died for you.

Now Peter's life is all about this man-who-is-God and what he has done.

This is the message Peter now goes around proclaiming...

This is the message he brings to Cornelius and his household...

The message of Jesus Christ—his life, death, and resurrection...

To save them from their sins.

Peter experienced God's heart for the lost, broken, and outsider personally...

Now he is aligned with God's mission in the world.

So maybe this week you take time to examine your relationship with Christ...

What have I been saved from?

Am I aligned with God's mission to save the lost, like he saved me?

Expect it.

God's heart for the lost, broken, and outsider is enormous.

God is bringing life to our neighbors...

And he is doing it through his people...

The church...

You and me.

Expect it.

May we know his salvation in our lives...

And may we carry that same love to those around us by the power of his Spirit.

Amen.