

# Sermons at First Church

**A Ministry of the Word**  
**May 15, 2022**

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Clarksburg, WV**

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**Acts 11:1-18**

*If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed I the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God? (Acts 11:17 N.R.S.V.)*

## **Peter's Defense**

Give me that old time religion. Give me that old time religion. It's good enough for me!

Hi there. My name is Simon Peter. I am one of the original 12 disciples and the leader of the Christian Church in Jerusalem. I've been working on a new song. I think it is going to be a big hit. I can't sing it for you, because I haven't figured out the tune yet, but here are some of the words.

Give me that old time religion. It was good for the Hebrew children. It was good for mother and father. It's good enough for me. What do you think?

Okay, okay, I'm jerking your chain a bit. I didn't write that song. According to your history books it was not written until 1873 your time. But that sentiment was alive and well in first century Jerusalem. And that is not a bad thing in and of itself. Afer all without rules and traditions, life would be utter chaos, and that would be bad.

But here is the thing. Sometimes God leads us in new ways that challenge our traditional ways of thinking and being. When that happens, we face a crisis of faith. Will we follow God into new ways, or will we make an idol out of our traditions?

I myself am a Jew. I was raised a Jew, steeped, stewed, and boiled in Judaism. For that matter, Jesus was also a Jew, so were all of the 12 original disciples. And we Jews are very proud of our traditions.

We Jews are a stubborn people. We are very proud of the fact that we are the chosen people of God. We cling stubbornly to that identity. We have had to do that to survive all the persecutions that we have been through. And we divide the world into two types of people: those who are Jews and those who are not Jews. The Jews are the in group and the non-Jews, the Gentiles are the out group.

It has been that way for thousands of years. And we like that way. It was good for the Hebrew children. It was good for mother and father. It is good enough for me!

So in the very early Christian Church we just naturally assumed that only Jews could become Christian. Even though the word Apostle means ambassador, we early leaders saw ourselves more as the bouncers for God than the ambassadors for God. We wanted to keep the faith pure. And in our minds that meant keeping the wrong sort of people out.

Much to our surprise and chagrin, the Holy Spirit had different ideas. The Holy Spirit was urging us to reach out to the hated Gentiles, to invite them to become Christians. That was just too much for me. Sure Jesus the long promised messiah had come and that had changed a lot of things. But surely not that. The Gentiles were the very ones who were always persecuting our people. The very idea of inviting them into the new church made my blood boil. I was not going to be party to any such illogical, irrational, foolishly soft hearted stuff.

Give me that old time religion. It was good for the Hebrew Children. It's good enough for me.

So let me ask you a question. What would it take for you to change your mind about some deeply rooted and cherished belief that you have? If God wanted you to change your mind about something like that, what would it take?

So there I was in Joppa deep in prayer when I fell into a trance. Then God sent me a vision. A sheet was let down from heaven and it contained all kinds of different animals, including beasts of prey, and reptiles. And a voice said to me, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat." But I said, "Not me, nothing unclean or profane has ever entered my mouth." Then the voice said, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." The vision repeated three times.

As you may know, part of what set us Jews apart was our rules about what we could eat. We could eat cows and sheep, but not pigs. We could eat chickens but not hawks or buzzards. We could eat fish but not eels. And don't even get me started on reptiles. Ugh!

So don't you come offering me some cooked snake meat and telling me it tastes like chicken. You do that and I am out the back door. If there isn't a back door, I will make one by running right through the wall. The very idea gives me the willies. Ugh!

I snapped out of my trance to find that there were three men at the door and they wanted me to go with them to the house of a Gentile, an officer in the Roman army. The Holy Spirit was whispering in my ear that my vision had not been about food at all. It was about what people God considered clean or unclean. Now we Jews are not allowed to enter the house of a Gentile. And this was not ordinary Gentile. This Cornelius was an officer in the Roman Army. He was one of the soldiers who was responsible for keeping us Jews oppressed.

But the Holy Spirit urged me to not make a fuss, to go with them. So I did. Though I did find myself wondering along the way what my fellow church members would think of what I was doing.

We got to Cornelius' house and went in. Cornelius revealed to me that while in prayer, God had

sent an angel to tell him to send men to get a man named Peter from the city of Joppa to come and talk to him. I still get goose bumps thinking about that. The Holy Spirit was not only speaking to me, but was also speaking to this Gentile! Wow! So I told Cornelius all about Jesus and the forgiveness of sin, and life everlasting.

Cornelius was overjoyed at the message and wanted to be baptized immediately. So I baptized him. And then, wonder of wonders. The gift of the Holy Spirit was given to Cornelius, just like it had been to the rest of us Christians. That was the final proof for me. The Holy Spirit was knocking down walls and expanding the family table- who was I to hinder God?

Of course, when I got back to Jerusalem I was called on the carpet by the other Christians. They wanted to know, what was I doing consorting with the enemy? Was this true that I had entered the house of a Gentile and a Roman officer at that? So I had to tell the whole story to them.

You may notice that this whole story is repeated four times in the Book of Acts. That shows how important this moment was. It also reflects the fact that I had to retell this story 400 times. Everyone wanted to hear this story for themselves. It is so hard to let loose of long cherished beliefs. But when I got to the part about Cornelius receiving the same gift of the Holy Spirit as we had, they too were convinced. And they said, "Who are we to stand in God's way."

That wasn't the end of the story of course, not even for me. I am ashamed to admit it, but Brother Paul had to come to Jerusalem and call me to account. When I was out in Gentile territories, I ate with the Gentiles. But when I got back home to Jerusalem, I reverted to old habits and would eat only with fellow Jews.

As much as it might seem so to you, peer pressure was not invented when you were a teenager. It has been around a lot longer than that. And peer pressure does not go away when we become adults. Even preachers, apostles, and prophets enjoy being well thought of.

So Paul called me out, and I admitted I was wrong and changed my behavior. Like I said, that is not easy. But I was not going to be the one to stand in God's way. That is for sure.

How about you? A lot has changed in 2000 years, but people, even good Christian church members are still tempted to divide people into groups of in and out. People like me and people not like me. People who deserve God's love and those who do not deserve God's love.

Brother John in his gospel reminds us that, "God so loved the world, that he sent his only begotten son, so that those who believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Prejudice, jealousy, and fear are always building walls to keep people out. But the Holy Spirit is always seeking to tear down the dividing wall and expand the size of the family table. Thank God that the mission of the church is not our possession, it is always the mission of the Holy Spirit. Thank God for visions, reminders, and wake up calls that let us know when we are hindering the kingdom.

May we never be the one standing in the way of God's grace and love. Amen.