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Easter V  
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Text: Acts 11:1 – 18  
Title: Members Only

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. I've had many jobs over the years, and each one has helped me to become the person that I am today. No matter how hard the work might have been, each job still had something about it that I liked, but one of my favorite jobs was also my very first one. Beginning with my freshman year of high school I worked as a caddy at a premier country club in the south suburbs of Chicago called Olympia Fields.

I worked there every summer until I began my internship as a Director of Christian Education in Minnesota in 1995. I got a lot out of that job. The money that I made helped me pay my college tuition, and I learned to appreciate the game of golf for all of its intricate details and difficulties. The work kept me in good physical shape as I walked about 5 miles almost every day, and I got to meet a lot of interesting people who typically had a lot of money. Some of them were self-made entrepreneurs who had been very successful in business or who just had jobs that paid them a high salary. Sure there were a few people who had inherited their money, but even those people still worked to maintain what they had. I met a few professional golfers through that job, and a few different charity events gave me the chance to meet some sports celebrities such as Bears' coach, Mike Ditka, the legendary Michael Jordan, and the NHL all-star Mario Lemieux.

The one thing that everyone who worked there understood was that the golf club wasn't for just anyone who wanted to play. No, this was a members only country club. You had to meet certain criteria to be accepted as a member, and of course you had to pay a lot too.

I also remember that the members only policy of this particular country club came under some intense scrutiny in the early '90's when Michael Jordan himself applied for membership. He had played there regularly as a guest and as a participant in charity events. He certainly had enough money and name recognition. He also appreciated the importance of privacy that the members of the club valued, but he was turned down when he applied to become a member. The scrutiny came because Mr. Jordan's rejection made the newspapers, and the restricted nature of the club – no black people, Jewish people or women were allowed as members back then – was criticized heavily. The negative publicity was so strong that within a year the club had its first four black members. The country club's policy is less restrictive and prejudiced now, but it is still very much members only.

Members only. That was the attitude of the new converts to the new Christian Church soon after Jesus ascended into heaven. Today's reading from Acts chapter 11 gives us an insight into that attitude. The writer of the book, St. Luke who wrote the Gospel of Luke, tells us that, "Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, 'You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.'" Peter was under attack by a faction among the early Christians because he had associated and eaten a meal with people who weren't members of the club. Good Jews just didn't do that. It made them unclean.

The circumcision party that Luke is writing about here was a faction of the early Christian Church who thought that anyone who became a Christian had to also observe the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, specifically the requirement for all males to be circumcised. Their thinking was along these lines. All of the apostles and most of the original followers of Jesus were devout Jews before believing in the Messiah. They had observed all of

the ceremonial laws that God had given to the Israelites in the Torah. They had all been circumcised and allowed to worship in the temple in Jerusalem. The early Christians were still worshipping in that temple, and they had the view that any new Christians should be willing and able to do the same thing.

So, the members of this circumcision party believed that non-Jewish converts to Christianity must become Jews at the same time that they were becoming Christians. There were even some members of this sect who weren't sure whether non-Jews or Gentiles as they were called, could even become Christians. As a part of their beliefs on this matter, they looked down on and criticized anyone who associated with the uncircumcised converts. They were still thinking of Gentiles as a Jew would – that Gentiles were to be avoided. Gentiles were unclean. They weren't members of the club.

After being confronted by this faction, Peter had to defend what he had done and explain why he had done it. He told them, "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. Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. 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. 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; he will declare to you a message by

which you will be saved, you and all your household.' 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.' 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?"

It all started when Peter was praying in the city of Joppa, and he received a vision of a sheet descending from heaven with various unclean animals on it. He was amazed when he was told to eat, and he refused because of the Jewish dietary laws which he had always kept. But the same thing happened to him three different times, and then he was immediately visited by a group of Gentiles. They wanted him to go with them to Caesarea, and the Holy Spirit told Peter to go and not to worry about the fact that they were Gentiles. While Peter was at the house in Caesarea, he witnessed the Holy Spirit blessing the Gentiles in the same way that he had been blessed with the other believers in Christ on Pentecost Day. The experience convinced him that the Lord was bringing the Gentiles into His Church without any regard as to their background. Peter even says at the end, "...who was I that I could stand in God's way?" The reading ends with these wonderful words, "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.'" The message of Peter's adventure was clear to everyone, even the circumcision party; God's will was to bring the Gentiles into the Christian faith as well.

The church today can find itself acting very much like the circumcision party from today's text. It's so easy for us to become too comfortable with the way that things are or to place so much importance on how we should do things that we forget that the Lord wants us to look beyond our own walls. We begin to think of this place as ours and we forget that all of it

belongs to God, and that He wants us to use the gifts that He has given to spread His Gospel to the whole world. At the same time, we start to pick and choose who we want to share the Good News of Jesus with, and we unconsciously reach the conclusion that some people belong in our church and others don't. But Jesus commanded all of us to share the Gospel with everyone, no exceptions.

As Christians you are called by Jesus to live by a new command. He showed the early Church through Peter's work that the Gospel is meant for everyone, and it wasn't just for members only. No, the Gospel is open to the public, and no one is excluded from it. Jesus gives us His new command in the Gospel reading for today, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The greatest way for us to live by this new commandment from Jesus is to share His Gospel with everyone. What better way to show love for someone else than to share with them the greatest gift that you have ever received? By telling them that Jesus died to pay for their sins. By letting them know that He rose from the grave and defeated death for everyone including them. By loving them enough to want them to be in heaven with you, that is how, ultimately, you show love for someone else.

When you show your love for someone else, then people will know that you are a disciple of Jesus. That is what He says to the apostles and to us. By showing love for one another you are showing who you belong too. As His disciples, Jesus calls us to give His love and His Gospel to everyone. He sacrificed His life for all people, and when He comes back, it will be to bring us home to be with Him forever. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.