

ALL TOGETHER, NOW
May 18, 2025 Acts 11: 1-18
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If he was the one gracing this pulpit, this morning, I would introduce him with words like these:

Joseph Carey Merrick was born in 1862 in Leicester (LES-ter), England. He attended public schools until he was 13 years old when he was forced by his father and stepmother to leave home and find a job. He joined the circus and traveled about England and Europe and found that he had a great love for art and literature. In his early 20's he returned to live in London where he gained some notoriety as a poet and artist.

With an unwavering pursuit of knowledge, a deep appreciation for literature and art, and an extraordinary ability to inspire those around him, he channeled his insights into creative expressions that continue to move hearts and minds, leaving behind works of profound beauty and reflection. This model of a London church is, today, displayed in the London Museum and was created by Merrick out of nothing but cardboard and paste using only his left hand. Through his experiences, he cultivated insight that continues to enlighten us to this day and invites us all to ponder the true essence of humanity.

He was a man whose life embodied resilience, wisdom, and the boundless capacity of the human spirit. His is a story that transcends time, reminding us of the power of perseverance and the dignity found in every soul.

Ladies and gentlemen, I give you, Mr. Joseph John Carey Merrick...The Elephant Man

To this day science has not been able to determine with any certainty what it was that so afflicted John Merrick. Most believe that it was a combination of Neurofibromatosis and Proteus syndrome, but we don't know for sure. What we do know is that he was 5'2" tall but his head had a circumference of more than 3 feet and was so heavy that he had to sleep sitting up with his legs pulled up and forehead resting on his knees. If he tried to sleep lying down, he would suffocate which was exactly what happened on April 11, 1890, when, at the age of 27, Merrick desiring to test the theory one more time, lay down flat on his back and died in his sleep.

His best friend and physician, Dr. Frederick Treves said this of his death: *He often said to me that he wished he could lie down to sleep 'like other people' ... he must, with some determination, have made the experiment ... Thus, it came about that his death was due to the desire that had dominated his life—the pathetic but hopeless desire to be 'like other people'.*

To be like other people. Buried in the deepest recesses of the human psyche is that compelling need – to not stand out, to fit in, to be like other people. Or, at the very least, for other people to be like us.

PETER & CORNELIUS

In the first century CE Jews didn't like Samaritans and Samaritans didn't like Jews. It was a mutual thing. Jews didn't like Samaritans because they were different, and Samaritans didn't like Jews for the same reason.

Samaria was a region that took up most of what, today, is northern Israel. The Jews lived in the region of Judah in modern day, southern Israel. They thought the Samaritans, who were descendants of Hebrews who married outside their faith, were a mongrel race, unclean traitors to their religion and their ethnic identity.

When traveling from Judah in the south to Galilee in the north, most Jews would go miles out of their way to keep from going through Samaria.

The cities of Lydda and Joppa sat directly on the border between Judah and Samaria and were the homes of two of the earliest Christian communities. It was to these two cities that Peter traveled as he went north from Jerusalem to call on the Christians in the outlying areas and see how they were doing.

In Lydda he healed a paralytic man named Aeneas. Word of his presence and power spread through the local area called Sharon or the Plain of Sharon, and before long a couple of men from the city of Joppa, about thirty miles away showed up.

One of the women in their little Christian community, a tailor and a devout, kind, and generous soul named Tabitha (Dorcas in Greek) had died and they asked if Peter would come to the funeral to honor her, which he did. But when he got there and saw her and the clothing she had made and the heartbreaking grief of those who had loved her, he prayed that she could be reanimated, raised from the dead, and she was.

Peter then stayed in Joppa for awhile at the home of one of the Jewish Christians of that town, a tanner named Simon, whose house was on the beach.

Thus far he had dipped his toe into Samaritan territory by being in Joppa and Lydda, but he had not stepped fully in.

Meanwhile, up in Caesarea, there was a Roman soldier, a Centurion, the leader of the Italian Cohort, and his name was Cornelius. He was a devout and pious man who had adopted the Jewish religion as his own, but he was not a Jew. He was what the Jews referred to as one of the "Righteous Gentiles," a gentile who had adopted Judaism in every aspect but one – circumcision. So, while he believed in God and kept all the Jewish rites and holy days, he would never be allowed into the temple in Jerusalem, and he would never be allowed to worship in the same room as the Jews.

Caesarea, where he lived, was a Samaritan city. It was built by the tetrarch, Phillip, son of Herod the Great, on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea as a resort, someplace he could go in the summer to get away from the desert heat. It was large and urbane and pagan and,

well, Samaritan to the core. It was a vacation spot – and still is. It was filled with wealthy Jews, Samaritans, Romans, Syrians and people from all over the region, many of whom identified themselves with one religion or another but most of whom didn't really practice any religion at all. Kind of like modern day America.

Cornelius was the exception.

He was devout. He prayed. He went to the local synagogue even though he couldn't worship with the Jews and had to sit in the atrium and watch the proceedings take place. He was kind and generous and one day, when he was praying, he had a vision of an angel of God that came to him and said, "Cornelius, send some men down to Joppa to find a man named Simon Peter. He's staying on the beach at the house of a tanner named Simon. Tell him that you want him to come and preach and teach to you and your whole household."

So, he did. He sent some guys down to Joppa to look for this Simon Peter guy.

Meanwhile, Simon Peter was having a dream/vision of his own.

In his dream a big sheet was lowered by its four corners down in front of Peter and on it were all kinds of non-kosher foods. I mean, we're talking pork chops and bacon, and coconut fried shrimp, and camel steaks. Peter heard a voice say, "Peter, dig in."

Peter refused because he was a devout Jew and he kept kosher, but the voice said, "What God has made clean, you should no longer consider unclean." And then it happened three more times just to sort of drive the point home.

Then, no sooner does Peter come out of his dream than someone comes to him and says there are three guys from Caesarea, servants of a guy named Cornelius and they want you to go with them. After a brief discussion Peter agrees to go, and he takes six of the Christians from Joppa with him and they all head back up to Caesarea in the *heart of Samaritan country*.

They make their way to Cornelius's home where he has brought together all his friends and relatives and neighbors and, one can imagine, some of the people who worked for him. He was a man of some considerable power and influence, so the house was pretty full and they were all there to hear Peter preach.

Well, as the stand-up comics say, Peter killed. He preached the Good News of Jesus Christ, and they heard his message, and the Holy Spirit descended on that place and anointed everyone in the house – Jews, gentiles, Romans, Samaritans – I mean everyone. And they were praying and singing and dancing around and speaking in tongues and Peter and the other Christians from Joppa were a little taken aback by all of this so Peter told his friends that everyone in the house should be baptized as quickly as possible, which they were, and then he stayed on for a couple of days to get to know everyone and kind of help them get organized into a proper Christian community.

After a few days he decided that this Christianity thing was a whole lot bigger than he or anyone else had realized. Why, even gentiles were getting it. What he and the other Jewish Christians had thought was just a reform movement in Judaism was turning out to be a religious revolution.

It was turning out to be, as historian and theologian David Bentley Hart says: “A truly massive and epochal revision of humanity’s prevailing vision of reality so pervasive in its influence and so vast in its consequences as actually to have created a new conception of the world, of history, of human nature, of time and of the moral good.” In other words, it was a pretty big deal.

Peter realized that he had to get back to Jerusalem and share this new development with the Jewish Christians there, what you and I might call the board of directors or, in Methodism, the Bishop and the cabinet, what my kids called “The Mother Ship”: This Jesus thing, he would tell them, is bigger than any of us ever imagined. Why, even gentiles are jumping on board.

Imagine his disappointment when the counsel’s response to his announcement was simply to turn up their noses and say, “Gentiles? You’ve been talking to gentiles? Good heavens. Why on earth would you do that? They’re not like us, you know. Why would you want to include them?”

PEOPLE NOT LIKE US

They’re not like us, you know.

Something there is what makes us draw back from people who are different from us. The color of their skin, the way they talk, their social customs, who they love, the food they eat – if it’s too different. It makes us uncomfortable.

When we draw a circle of inclusiveness around ourselves there’s something in us that makes us more comfortable with a small circle than with a big one, more comfortable with a few people than with many.

The problem is that small circles just aren’t tenable anymore and for Christians, they never really were.

Author Thomas Freidman, in his book, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the 21st Century* reminds us that, whether we like it or not, whether we want it or not, the world is stretching our inclusiveness circle and making it bigger. The Berlin Wall has fallen and, with apologies to Rudyard Kipling, east has met west. The Internet, cell phones, laptop computers, satellite communication and other technological advances put us in touch with people from all over the world in seconds.

(I recently played a game online with a table of eight people. Brazil, Austria, China, Australia, Mexico, Canada and Germany were all represented. I was the only American at the table. Our host was in Dubai.)

Several years ago, we saw people stranded in airports all over Europe and North America because of a volcano in Iceland. When they were interviewed by news reporters their accents were from around the globe, yet their problem was identical – they couldn't get home.

Produce grown in Africa sat, ripening in warehouses because planes in Europe weren't flying and couldn't pick it up and deliver it to its destination. Economists were speculating on how the volcano was affecting the economy not just of Iceland or even Europe, but the whole world. The Trump Tariffs are having an effect not unlike that of the volcano. The economic foundations of the entire world are being shaken.

When I was riding a bus through Managua, Nicaragua, there were lots of things that surprised me but one of the biggest surprises was the number of American fast-food restaurants. McDonalds, Burger King, Papa John's, Pizza Hut, Dominos – those Nicaraguans love their Italian pizza that is made in the United States. McDonalds now has restaurants in 125 countries, worldwide, including Russia, China, Hong Kong, Brunei, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Kenya. More than 35,000 restaurants in total, as of yesterday.

I remember a couple of years ago when the campus of Xavier University was dotted with signs containing the "Ethic of Reciprocity" – what we call the Golden Rule – as it is stated in ten different world religions. Students are learning, on their way to classes, that the world has become a whole lot smaller and flatter than they realized.

ALL IN THE SAME BOAT

Or maybe it always has been flat, and we were just too busy to realize it.

This area of the church, for instance, the area where the pews are, has always been called the "nave." It's from the Latin word "navis" which means "boat." You might recognize it as the same word from which we get the word "navy."

At any rate, we call this section of the church the nave or boat to remind us that historically, one of the most enduring metaphors for the church has been the boat. We are all in it together. It stays upright only so long as every person moves in chorus with every other person. It moves forward only if we all row together. It needs constant maintenance and repair. It is our haven in the storm and, no matter how violently it rocks before the wind and the waves, we are acutely aware that we are better off on the inside than we would be on the outside.

We're all in this thing together. There are no independent agents anymore. And if this is true for the rest of the world, it is doubly so for Christians. 200 years ago, John Wesley said, "There's no such thing as a solitary Christian." How much truer it is today!

The door of the church is wide enough for any who desires to enter there.

Peter responds to his critics in Jerusalem by telling them about his dream of the sheet with the foods made clean by God and the story of how he came to be at the home of Cornelius. He describes how he was called by the Spirit to go with three gentile men who came to him

and to “not make a distinction between them and us.” He tells of how, when he spoke to the gentiles in Caesarea “the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning.”

QED.

Thus, it is demonstrated. The thing proves itself. If the Holy Spirit decides to anoint gentiles – people who aren’t like us – then who are we to argue?

The world is flat, after all. And even if it weren’t, the church of Jesus Christ is.

AMEN