

# ***The Uncontrollable Spirit***

**Acts 11:1-18**

**Sermon by Dan Schrock**

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*Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?”*

*Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’*

*But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?”*

*When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.” (NRSV)*

For a long time Jenny and I have had this anxious little game we play when we come back home from being away on vacation. As we turn into our neighborhood we ask each other: “Will our house still be there? What if it burned down while we were gone, or a windstorm blew a tree over and smashed our roof?” We’re always relieved to pull into the driveway and see our house is still intact.

Most of us like the major contours of our life to be settled. We want our homes to last, our jobs to be secure, our paychecks to be steady, and our relationships to be reliable. We don’t want to have our life turned upside down. We want the major pieces of our life to be fairly predictable. This includes religious matters. We Christians hope for stability in the church. Little surprises are ok, but please, O God, spare us from the big surprises. Let things be done decently and in order. We just don’t like it when our religious world is upended.

The book of Acts begins with things in a decent, orderly condition. At this point in time, Jesus has risen from tomb and ascended to heaven. The Jewish disciples in Jerusalem withdraw from the hurly burly of the city to establish a quiet, orderly, and secluded communal life centered around prayer. Peter, with an eye for efficient administration, proposes that they restore the circle of 12 apostles by finding a new person to replace Judas, who by now is dead. Everyone agrees to this fine administrative plan, and Matthias is duly chosen. Order is now restored. Life should now be predictable.

Then suddenly, during their safe, predictable prayer, pandemonium breaks out! Sounds overwhelm them. Tongues of fire grab them. Strange speech erupts from their lips. The walls of the meeting room cannot contain what is happening. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit shatters order and predictability, forcing the disciples from the upper room out into the streets and marketplaces of the world.

The book of Acts is about a Holy Spirit who shoves and yanks the church in new directions. In Acts, the Holy Spirit is the one in charge, not the church. The Spirit challenges the old verities, questions the old certainties, and even reverses the old moralities. With such a Spirit at loose in the world, the church is caught flatfooted. The church scrambles to keep pace with the Spirit's new and astonishing moves. Exhibit A is what happened to Peter, whom the Holy Spirit dragged into a new morality and a new worldview very much against Peter's will.

This unsettling story begins one noon when Peter goes up to pray on the roof of a friend's house. Streets in those days were terribly noisy, choked with people and donkeys and playing children. The only place to pray, if you wanted solitude and a wee bit of quiet, was up on the roof. So there Peter goes, with the hope of renewing himself after several hard days of healing sick people. As you read the story, you have to admit Peter was hungry. The rumblings in his stomach might have affected his brain just a bit. But you can't blame hunger for what happened to him that noonday on the roof. You have to blame it on the Spirit.

Like other good Jews of the time, Peter had very clear beliefs about the moral question of what was clean and what was unclean. Starting in childhood, his parents, his

local rabbi, and other authority figures had drilled into him Jewish notions about ritual and moral purity. It was very clear in scripture. All you had to do was read Deuteronomy 14:1-20. Let me refresh your memory of that text.

“You are children of the Lord your God. For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; it is you the Lord has chosen out of all peoples on earth to be God’s people, a treasured possession.

“You shall not eat any abhorrent thing. These are the animals you may eat: the ox, the sheep, the goat, the hart, the gazelle, the roebuck, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope, and the mountain-sheep. Any animal that divides the hoof and chews the cud, you may eat. Yet of those that chew the cud or have the hoof cleft you shall not eat these: the camel, the hare, and the rock badger, because they chew the cud but do not divide the hoof; they are unclean for you. And the pig, because it divides the hoof but does not chew the cud, is unclean for you. You shall not eat their meat, and you shall not even touch their carcasses.

“Of the animals that live in water you may eat these: whatever has fins and scales you may eat. But whatever does not have fins and scales you shall not eat; it is unclean for you.

“You may eat any clean birds. But these are the ones that you shall not eat: the eagle, the vulture, the osprey, the buzzard, the kite of any kind; every raven of any kind; the ostrich, the nighthawk, the sea gull, the hawk of any kind; the little owl and the great owl, the water hen and the desert owl, the carrion vulture and the cormorant, the stork, the heron of any kind; the hoopoe [pronounced *hewpew*] and the bat. And all winged insects are unclean for you; they shall not be eaten.”

For faithful Jews like Peter, this is clear and straightforward morality. Things are either right or wrong. Laws like this set apart a Jew’s life from the Gentile world. The belief was that God had chosen Jews out of all the people on the earth to be special, to be holy. And one mark of their holiness was clear moral standards.

Peter, however, is about to find out that prayer is a dangerous activity. He will discover that during prayer the Holy Spirit might turn one of your cherished moral standards upside down and replace it with a different moral standard. What happens is this: the Spirit shows Peter a grand bed sheet, full of the same unclean critters Deuteronomy said were off limits. And the Spirit says as clearly as can be: “Get up from your knees, Peter. Kill one of them and eat it.”

Can you imagine Peter's righteous indignation at hearing these words from the selfsame God who had told him and his ancestors not to eat these animals? “By no means, Lord! I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean, and I’m not going to start now!” Acts 10:17 says Peter “was greatly puzzled” about what to make of this vision. I rather think that is an understatement; “greatly scandalized” might be a better way of putting it.

At that moment messengers from Cornelius come knocking on the front gate, and as events unfold over the next two days, the meaning of the vision becomes obvious: the unclean animals of the vision symbolize the supposedly unclean Gentiles, and the Holy Spirit is now calling Jewish Christians to welcome Gentiles into the church as they would welcome their own flesh and blood.

Almost nothing in Peter's religious past has prepared him for this shocking turn of events. The Spirit is rearranging a major portion of Peter's morality. It's shifting the assumptions on which Peter had built a large part of his religious life, pushing him in unexpected, even painful directions. By the time he stands in front of Cornelius' household, Peter scrambles to find scriptural and theological support for what is happening to him. At that moment he cannot think of any scripture text that justifies what the Spirit has just done. With the benefit of hindsight, you and I might point out to Peter that he could find the theme of God's openness to the Gentiles in the books of Ruth and Jonah, but for a Jew of Peter's time and place, that theme was hard to see.

So Peter scrambles, and I want us to notice the solution he comes up with. Standing there surrounded by eager Gentiles, waiting to hear what he will say, Peter struggles to find scriptural and theological justification for what the Holy Spirit is doing. Sometime

read Peter's speech in 10:34-43 and pay attention to the progression of his thought. It reads very much like a speech invented on the fly. Notice how the speech begins with an eye-opening argument: that God shows no partiality. Now how is Peter going to prove that? After all, the entire structure of Jewish and early Jewish Christian faith depended on the idea that God *does* show partiality. Peter next comes out with a platitude everyone would agree with, that anybody who fears God and lives rightly is welcome into faith. Finally in verse 36 Peter seizes on the theological heart of the matter and utters something new: that Jesus Christ is Lord! And if Christ is Lord, then he is Lord of everyone and everything, which must mean Gentiles are also welcome in Christ's church.<sup>1</sup>

He is Lord of all. That's the theological method Peter uses to make sense of this new act of the Holy Spirit. Jesus rules over everything in the universe, so everyone is welcome in his church. For us, of course, this is a commonplace idea, but remember that it was still a very new idea in Peter's time. Their scripture—our Old Testament—had nothing in it to support the claim that Jesus is Lord. Peter and the rest of the early church made that claim based solely on their own experience of Jesus while he was still alive, and the experience of seeing the astonishing work of the Spirit around them. Peter is on risky ground here, without either scripture or tradition to back him up. He's making a theological move that largely rests on experience.

As unsettling as we might find it, it seems this is how the Spirit sometimes works, even today. The continuing work of the Holy Spirit in the world and in the church might lead us in new and astonishing directions that are not explicitly mentioned in scripture, but nevertheless that are consistent with the claim that Jesus Christ is Lord of the universe.

Let us be clear that this all comes from the Holy Spirit, whom we in the church do not control. In collaboration with the other members of the Trinity, the Spirit is sovereign and can do whatever is necessary to further God's mission in the world. In Acts, the church's new directions result directly from strategic decisions made by the Holy Spirit. Once the Spirit has acted, the church then employs skillful leadership, faithful preaching, and diligent Bible study to interpret what the Spirit has just done.

We in the church try our best to tame the Holy Spirit. Sometimes I think some of us are even afraid of the Spirit. We try to privatize it, restrict it, and institutionalize it. Yet the Spirit of God will not be tamed by us. We will not be able to stuff the Spirit in a box and slam the lid shut, only opening the lid at our own convenience, when and where we decide we want to let the Spirit out just a little. The Spirit is not our errand boy. The sovereign Spirit will do what it will do, and generally will not bother to ask our permission.

I wonder if this story could be as unsettling in our day as it was in Peter's day. How do you think the Holy Spirit might be working in you? In our congregation? In our denomination? In today's worldwide church? Where is the Spirit pushing and pulling us to change the way we think about God's purposes in the world?

**Notes**

1. William Willimon, *Acts* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 97-99.
2. Willimon, 104.