

Sermon

March 30, 2008

Acts 11:1-18.

"The Spirit-led Missional Church"

My new title could be: "How the Spirit Does Evangelism." or "Easy Evangelism" or "Sharing about Jesus the Easy Way" or "Doing our Part as the Spirit Moves."

Manuscript:

It is a privilege to be here. My name is Andy Rowell and I am a doctoral student at Duke Divinity School. My interests are church leadership and the New Testament. I am originally from Wheaton, Illinois. I did my seminary at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada and was a pastor there for six years. I taught Biblical Studies and the practice of Christian Ministry the last couple of years at Taylor University in Indiana. This past summer, we moved to Durham. My wife and I have a two year old and a six month year old. I'm sorry they aren't here today.

Thanks again for having me. I hope to walk through a passage of Scripture with you and suggest some ways we might be challenged by it.

What for you is the ideal church?

Donald McGavran was a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary in the 1970's. He wanted to see churches grow. He is famous for one major idea: people like to be around other people like themselves. Therefore, churches that want to grow should cultivate opportunities where people can be with other people like them.

Rick Warren, the pastor well known for his 2002 best seller *The Purpose Driven Life*, picked up on McGavran's insight and repeated it in his 1995 book *The Purpose Driven Church*. No one, says Warren, would listen to a radio station that played totally miscellaneous styles of music. Radio stations specialize in reaching out to a specific group of people (rock, country, hip hop, etc.). Churches should do the same. They should have a target audience. Warren set out to do just that – describing unchurched Harry and Mary as his targets.

Warren encouraged pastors to plan every aspect of how visitors would experience the church. In order to do this, one must meticulously plan to appeal to a certain demographic of people. For example, Warren's church considers what a businessman in his 50's is accustomed to. They ask, "how can we make that person feel at home when they come to visit?" So Saddleback provides convenient parking, clear signage, manicured lawns, beautiful facilities, attractive greeters, outstanding music, plush seats, a talk on how to improve some aspect of their life, and the opportunity to get a latte afterward.

Warren's approach can certainly be described as successful in terms of numbers as they have about 22,000 in attendance at their church each weekend.

I deeply appreciate Rick Warren's passion to see un-churched people come to know the joy and meaning of following Jesus. A good friend of mine worked as a pastor there. He told me that one of the first weekends he was there they baptized fifty

adults. My friend was in the swimming pool helping baptize them. He told me later, “That day I knew then this was like no other church I’d ever been part of.”

There is much to like about what is going on at Saddleback and other seeker churches.

But I want to tell you about one other church before we look at Acts 11. I have visited Hot Metal Bridge Faith Community in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania twice in the last couple of years. It is jointly supported by the PCUSA (like Clayton Presbyterian Church) and also the United Methodist Church. It has about 300 in attendance. It is very diverse - some are college students, some are tattooed bikers, and some are older people. They worshipped in an old cafeteria. The most powerful moment for me of the worship service was the experience of sharing communion. This diverse group of people formed a huge circle holding hands and sang “I Love You Lord.” After communion,

people hugged one another. It was quite moving to see bikers hugging grandparents.

These kind of experiences make me question Rick Warren's approach of intentionally trying to reach a certain demographic of people. Isn't there something profoundly Christian about a diverse group of people hugging each other around Jesus' table?

If Hot Metal Bridge was a radio station, they would play a pop song, then a heavy metal thrasher song, then a hip hop song, then a hymn. Everyone is a bit uncomfortable probably but everyone is warmly welcomed.

So I really like Saddleback's prioritizing reaching the unchurched person by working hard to welcome the outsider. But I also like the Hot Metal Bridge's prioritizing of embracing people of every color, smell, age and income.

But most churches are like neither of these congregations. They rarely see adult conversions like Saddleback and are fairly homogenous communities unlike Hot Metal Bridge.

Is there anything we can do about it?

This isn't a message aimed at Clayton Presbyterian Church – I know almost nothing about this congregation – this is rather the message of the book of Acts for every Christian community. And the story told in Acts 10 and 11 are paradigmatic for the whole book. They address how the church should reach out. God is passionate about welcoming the outsider and wants to use us as his messengers.

I was assigned this chapter a number of months ago in your series working through the book of Acts.

We are going to work through Acts 11:1-18. [I am reading from the TNIV (Today's New International

Version)]. But at the beginning of the message I am just going to read verse 17.

## **Acts 11:17.**

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?"

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The passage begins this way,

*1 The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.*

Here is what is going on. Up until this point all of the Christians were Jews. That is, all the men were circumcised, the Christians were attending their local synagogues, adhering to Jewish food laws, and strictly keeping the Sabbath. To a great extent, they did not look any different from their fellow Jews except that they had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah talked about in the Old Testament.

This was a controversial issue *within* the Jewish community. But now these Jewish believers hear that Gentiles had also become believers in Jesus Christ and received the Holy Spirit.

I suppose this would be like hearing on the news today that a number of Islamic leaders had become Christians but intended to continue also in their Muslim traditions. We would respond. "Come again? Hmm . . . Muslim/Christians . . .that *might* be good but that also sounds a bit odd."

So when Peter goes up to Jerusalem, the headquarters for those who have become believers in Jesus, he has some explaining to do. Verses 2 and 3:

*2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him 3 and said, "You went into the house of the uncircumcised and ate with them."*

Peter is greeted with skepticism. “How does Peter get the idea that it is ok to disregard two thousand years of tradition of not eating in a Gentile home?” People who knew Peter probably said, “now we know Peter is impatient – wanting to walk on the water with Jesus, wack people with swords, etc. - but this is ridiculous. What gives Peter the right to think he can singlehandedly change the direction of the church? Who does he think he is the Pope?”

Ouch.

I have been a pastor. I could have told Peter that people in the church don't like change. There is the old pastor's legend about the pastor who wanted to move the piano to the other side of the sanctuary and the way he got away with it was by moving it an inch every week.

I would have told Peter that gem of pastoral wisdom, “Pastors often overestimate what they can change in one year but underestimate what they can change in five years. Peter, you are trying to

change a fundamental policy in one day, not one year, let alone the recommended five years.”

As Erik Erikson once said, change is hard because “all change is perceived as loss.” None of us like change when it is imposed on us. The business community recognizes this. There is a whole literature on leading change in organizations.

- Kotter, John P. *Leading Change*. Harvard Business School Press, 1996.
- [Making Sense of Change Management: A Compl...](#) by Esther Cameron
- [The Change Management Pocket Guide](#) by Kate Nelson
- [Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within...](#) by Robert E. Quinn
- [The Heart of Change Field Guide: Tools and...](#) by Dan S. Cohen
- [Managing Change and Transition](#) by Richard Luecke

Peter, welcome to the church.

A motto of the Reformers was, the reformed church is always in need of reforming.

If you find the perfect church, don't join it or it will no longer be perfect.

Like Noah's ark, it stinks being inside but it is still better than being outside.

I love the church but like loving anyone, it is messy.

All of that to say, change is hard.

If Peter faced criticism and the first apostles had trouble discerning the church's direction, of course we will do.

Fortunately the rest of the passage gives us some direction on moving forward together.

Peter begins by telling the story of his own experience. "This is what happened to me." I think this is often the best place for us to begin. Too often we mask our opinions about church with self-

righteous logic. We say, “this is what’s right. I know it!” We are often better off saying, “Let me tell you what the churches in my past have meant to me. That is why I feel so strongly about this issue.” Often times, when we do that, the other person can say, “Aha! Now I understand where you are coming from. I see why you are passionate about missions focus, good financial management, hymns, etc.”

Peter similarly doesn’t play the authority card. “I’m Peter, an apostle. This is the way it is.” No, he tells the story of how he has seen God move and invited others to draw their own conclusions.

So Peter launches in, chapter 11, verses 4-5

*4 Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: 5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying,*

Chapter 10 verse 9 tells us, “Peter went up on the roof to pray.”

It begins here. Peter makes himself available to God. He creates space for God to speak to him.

We do not know what Peter was praying but we can look back to Acts chapter 4 verse 29 and see this prayer by Peter and John's community, "Now, Lord, . . . [even though there are threats against us] *enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.*"

I was a pastor at a church in Vancouver, British Columbia from 1999-2005. One of the key stories the congregation told was how the congregation had dwindled to tiny number in the early 1980's. At that time the people had asked God for young families and that they might reach their neighborhood. By the time, I has arrived we had over a hundred children in Sunday school and an Asian Ministry pastor translating every sermon into Mandarin. The people looked back to those prayers as key to the development of the congregation.

What would it mean for this congregation to go up to the roof to pray? How might we pray that the Lord enable us despite our concerns to speak about what Jesus has done for us with great boldness?

Prayer is where it starts.

Let's read what happens next, verse 5 continued, *and in a trance I saw a vision.*

Peter says that he fell into a trance. Now, you might think that Peter is super-spiritual here to have had a vision but the text seems to me to lessen that quite a bit.

Chapter 10 verses 9-11 say this,

9 About noon . . . Peter went up on the roof to pray.

10 He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance.

Chapter 11:5-10

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.

I mentioned that I did not think that the emphasis was particularly on Peter's ultra-spirituality besides his making himself available by praying. Here's what I mean:

It's noon. Peter is hungry. He smells the food cooking and he is trying to pray. And he has a vision of food being lowered down to him. Not only that, but it is food that would break his diet. Juicy

shimmering slices of ham being lowered down in front of him on a tablecloth. Now is that our experience of prayer or what? Being distracted by food, our physical surroundings, thinking of ourselves and our own needs, struggling probably to stay awake . . . And when God tells us to do something we say, “Surely not, Lord!” Isn’t the Bible refreshingly frank about what we humans are like?

Make ourselves available by praying. God knows our prayers may be marred by weakness and selfishness and hard-headedness. He can still move.

Peter is a good Jew. He knows his Old Testament and has kept the Jewish food laws his whole life. As he’s praying, perhaps that he might share the good news of Jesus with boldness, he has this distracting vision of food.

So he wakes up. “Wow, that was a nightmare. That was really weird. I have got to get some food in my stomach and get off this roof and out of the sun.”

## Chapter 11, Verse 11.

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.

Three men from Cornelius the centurion show up and ask Peter to go to the Gentile's house. "Now that is a weird coincidence," thinks Peter. "I was just telling God that I would not eat Gentile food even though he was telling me to. When I wake up I immediately get an invitation to a Gentiles's home."

No wonder he feels the Spirit is telling him to go with them.

Now you might think to yourself, "Now why doesn't God guide *me* like that? Peter gets a vision and then someone knocks on the door confirming it. I would obey if he would be *that clear* with me."

I guess I would just say to you (and to me), Mark Twain's quote about the Bible, "It ain't the parts of

the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand."

G.K Chesterton put it even better, "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried."

I can speak for myself and say that reading Scripture often convicts me of things I should have done or could do for others.

Personally, I have been convicted ever since we moved into our neighborhood this summer that God wants us to love our neighbors. Profound, I know! But like Peter, I have my excuses.

"Don't good fences make good neighbors!," I say to God. "I could help with their lawn a bit but then it might become a pattern and then they'll depend on me and it will become a burden."

Thankfully though God has helped me to begin to carve out time when I am watching my boys to be outside with them and to visit the elderly neighbors

and help the single woman next door with her flowerbeds. Still though, I have got plenty of “Surely not, Lord’s” in my arsenal.

I’m convinced that if we go on our roof to pray, even if we are distracted and sleepy, the Holy Spirit will still from time to time convict us and encourage us.

“But,” you might ask, “what if, like Peter, we feel like we are being led to do something a bit unconventional? It seems like we could get in trouble if everyone was running around doing things we felt the Spirit had told us to do.”

What happens next in the story?

Peter invites six other Christian Jewish believers to go with him.

Verse 12 continued,

These six *brothers* also went with me, and we entered the man's house.

These *brothers*, 10:23, tells us are “believers from Joppa.”

Seven believers is enough to change the world. Peter gets six fellow believers to go explore what God is doing – to visit some outsiders.

Randy Frazee, in his book *The Connecting Church*, casts a vision for believers to intentionally live in proximity to one another and to reach out to their neighbors. He tells about various families from his church in Ft. Worth, Texas moving so that they could live on the same street and befriending their neighbors and hosting them for meals. Two to three families on a street can really make an impact.

A number of my single friends at Duke Divinity School live in community houses. This is not really all that complex. Rather than each renting apartments in different apartment buildings, they rented a big house, share the rent and take turns preparing meals. But they too have a vision for

loving their neighbors and having people in their home.

Similarly, I have seen Christian men from the same company who get together for breakfast once a week and pray that they might be people of integrity and that they might love their co-workers well. They also sometimes get together for meals with other coworkers. Those coworkers notice. “You guys are different. What is it?”

I was a pastor at a large church and often times people would come to me with ideas of things we as a church should do. “My old church ran this great program.” I would as graciously as I could encourage them to start the thing that they were hoping to see happen with a group of 5-7 people and see what would happen. Sometimes they probably thought I would be uninterested or was just putting them off. But I truly believe that these small gatherings and initiatives of 7 people going off

into a strange land with the gospel, prayerfully and boldly is often where the Spirit is moving.

So what happens when Peter and the seven believers show up?

Peter says in verses 13 through 17,

13 The centurion 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 <sup>[a]</sup> water, but you will be baptized with <sup>[b]</sup> 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?"

We know from Acts 10 that Peter's sermon about Jesus is quite simple. God loves all people. No matter who they are. He wants to bring healing to their broken lives. He wants to bring peace. Jesus went around doing good. Jesus was crucified and raised from the dead. Everyone who believes in him might find forgiveness of sins.

The book of Acts is short for its traditional title "The Acts of the Apostles," but as many Bible readers have commented throughout the ages, it really might better have been titled, "The Acts of the Holy Spirit." This is Peter's point exactly in this story. "Look this was not *me*. This was not my idea to reach the Gentiles. An angel told Cornelius to send for me and even gave him directions to my house (See 10:5-6. "He is staying with Simon the Tanner who lives by the Sea" in Joppa). I had a vision while I was praying just when they were arriving at my house. Remember my initial response to the vision? 'Surely not, Lord!' (verse 8). I brought

other believers along to corroborate what was happening – to testify that the *was a* god-thing not a Peter-being-impetuous thing – they were as astonished as I was when the Holy Spirit 10:45 came upon the Gentiles after my basic Jesus sermon. This was beyond me. This was a *series of coincidences* (if that is what you want to call them). You might think the devil made me do it but I'm telling you that I think the Spirit made me do it. *After* this all happened, I remembered a saying by Jesus that suggested this kind of thing would happen."

Peter concludes to those who initially criticized him for initiating this innovation, "What was I supposed to do?" Verse 17 "who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?"

Peter's listeners in Jerusalem were persuaded.

Verse 18:

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 Spirit of Jesus Christ is in the business of challenging believers to leave their comfort zone to proclaim the basic message of Jesus Christ to all. He is not content to let demographic and social barriers keep people from hearing the good news.

Rick Warren and his 22,000 attendance Saddleback congregation are passionate about seeing non-churched people come to faith in Jesus. They are prepared to alter their own comfortable ways in order to prioritize the welcoming of new people. They are driven by this passion.

Peter and his Jewish believing friends had to be jolted by the Spirit out of their internal focus. I would continue to challenge this congregation to try to remember that every week new people are visiting your congregation. Will you clearly have the information they need to know on your website? Will you welcome them appropriately and warmly

in the parking lot? Will you provide bright, clean and safe places for their children to be welcomed? Will you make your traditions here accessible, Paul's word in 1 Corinthians 12 is "intelligible," so that a new person understands what is going on? Will you do all of these things to clear away room so that people can hear about Jesus? It is fine if Jesus turns people off but what can we do to make sure it is not us who are turning people off?

And, as we think about Hot Metal Bridge and their hugging circle of bikers, students and grandparents, will we similarly put aside our own personal idea of target group? It is human nature, as Donald McGavran pointed out, to want to be with people like ourselves. Will we instead put aside our private preferences on who we want to see occupy these seats and instead be ready to welcome the disabled person, the Hispanic person, the African-American student preacher – not just as token visitors but as potential future leaders of this congregation? Not

only is the Holy Spirit at work drawing people to Jesus, he is also at work drawing people we would be astonished to think might be reached.

I wonder this morning which of your acquaintances in your neighborhood, in your workplace, in your school is being told by an angel, to spend more time with you or you or you. They are sitting at home watching Meet the Press or reading the Sunday morning newspaper or walking their dog and they are thinking about you.

Will you go on your roof in this moment as we sing this final song, in spite of your weakness in prayer, allow God to convict you and nudge you as well? Who is God asking you to invite for dinner or out to eat or for coffee? Who of you have common acquaintances you could get together with for a meal?

God is calling this congregation to reach non-churched diverse people. He is way ahead of you. Will you agree to be his simple, flawed messenger?

Let's pray.

Gracious God, we are thankful for you bringing many of us here to know you. We are weak. We are messed up. We have difficulty praying. But we want to be available for you to use us. Very few of us know what you are calling us to do right now, God. But many of us here are open and want you to use us. In the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.