

**“The Spirit Made Me Do It”**  
**Acts 11:1-18**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Easter**  
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Peter’s got to be one of the worst theologians ever produced by the church. After breaking the rules and eating with a Gentile all he can come up with is “The Spirit told me to do it.” He doesn’t quote any biblical text. He doesn’t make any solid theological argument. He doesn’t appeal to humanitarian concerns, or missional needs that might require the rethinking of an important rule. Just “the Spirit made me do it.”

I wish I had paid more attention to Peter in this text when I was a teenager. Young man, who do you think gave you the authority to stay out past your curfew? The Spirit told me to do it. I wish I had known his text when I was in the ordination process. Young man, why do you have a hard time accepting the authority of this committee? The Spirit told me to do it. I wish I had remembered this text last week. Dad, why did you eat the last cookie? The Spirit told me to do it!

Of course, unlike all those examples, Peter was *actually listening* to the Spirit. He was actually doing what the Spirit directed him to do. That’s the whole basis for the Way, that wonderful phrase, capitalized in the book of Acts that describes Christian vocation. When the people of “The Way” listen to the Spirit – they’re sent to teach and proclaim and love in powerful ways. They’re sent to love enemies, agitate friends, and break bread with people excluded. They’re given power to do extraordinary things which is exactly what Jesus promised to the church when he left back in the first chapter of Acts. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.” (Acts 1:8)

Which is probably why every time you turn around the disciples seem to be headed somewhere to pray. Power always comes from listening carefully. That’s what begins this whole chain of events - Peter went up on the rooftop in Joppa to pray. He had a vision that prepared him to go and meet with Cornelius, a Gentile. Prayer prepped him for a different way.

Now it’s been my experience that a lot of people in churches try to hide when you bring up the topic of prayer, even though prayer is really just another kind of listening. Bringing up prayer in church is sort of like bringing up exercise in our culture. We all know we should be doing more of it. Bring it up and people start feeling inadequate especially when the disciples seem so much better at it.

But Peter is not good at prayer, at least not on this day. We know this because when he goes up on the roof to pray, he is immediately distracted by food. That’s what the text says. “He became hungry and wanted something to eat” (Acts 10:10). It doesn’t say he meditated perfectly and God came to him. It doesn’t say that he sat in lotus position and after 30 minutes of perfect stillness, the Holy Spirit decided to come. It says, he went up to pray, he got hungry and wanted something to eat. And while he could smell it cooking in the kitchen, he fell into a trance about, you guessed it, food.

It's kind of refreshing for those of us who think we have trouble praying. Peter's supposed to be thinking about God and all he can think about is a juicy steak and mocha frappachino. And the Holy Spirit comes to him not in miracles or rushing winds, but in a dream about food when he's already hungry. It's kind of astonishing when you think about it. This is one of the odd ways that God works out God's purpose in the church. Not through some hero with the finest character traits. But through a fisherman who's still learning to pray.

The rock on which the church is built isn't a whole lot different from you or me. That's kind of the point of the Book of Acts, I think. To see what astonishing things God can do with ordinary human beings who aren't even that good at prayer. To see what the Spirit can do with the arrogance of a guy like Paul, or the failed loyalty of disciple like Peter, or the unremarkable gifts of a person like Dorcas. To see what God can do with you and me.

But that doesn't stop us from searching for their heroic attributes. We still look for all the ways that Peter is different and better than people like us. We long for heroes. We look for the President who will magically transform all the deep divisions in our country and give us what we want. We look for the Mayor who will take the problems sowed over generations and weed them out in a first term. In the church, we look for the super Christians, who are so different from us that we can never heal like them, never proclaim like them, never pray like them.

But the Bible gives us Peter – the one who denies Jesus three times, the one who thinks about food when he should be thinking about God, the ordinary apostle. And God takes him, this ordinary fisherman, and uses him to bring about a shift in the mission of the early church. That shift is seismic.

The promises of God, extended through Abraham and Torah and Jesus now include the Gentiles. Even the Gentiles are included in these promises. Even the Gentiles are chosen by this God. God's love knows no bounds. Maybe that doesn't seem like such big news today. Today some Christians sometimes ask the question will the Jews be saved when they don't believe in Jesus, but the real question of Luke's time was, will the Gentiles be saved?<sup>1</sup> The early church didn't worry so much about the salvation of the Jews - they already had the promises of God. "The gifts and the call of God are irrevocable," the Apostle Paul wrote. (Rom. 11:29). God uses a prayer-challenged disciple and a Gentile centurion to radically reorient the mission of the church.

And the hard part of this text for us is realizing just how badly the Spirit interrupts the church's well-laid plans. Peter had *planned* to announce the gospel among his own people. And just like that the Spirit sent him in an unexpected direction. The Spirit disrupts plans, calls people to do things they hadn't planned to do, invites us to engage people we hadn't planned to engage, spurs us to listen to the Spirit who comes despite of our lack of skill in prayer. Which is really disconcerting for those of us who like to believe we are the authors of our own lives.

We don't like to have our plans interrupted. We spend a lot of our lives being trained that we are the authors of our own plans. We spend significant time in church making plans. We wrestle with where the Spirit is leading us. We think critically

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<sup>1</sup> See William H. Willimon, *Acts*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press), 1988, 93-95.

about these plans. We define those plans, we learn how to articulate them and back them up with our best theology. “The Spirit told me to” is a theological statement we try to guard against. But the Spirit calls us beyond those plans, beyond those settled theologies, beyond our comfort.

The church has to be prepared for the Spirit to whisk ordinary disciples off to be with people we’re not authorized to be with, do things we’re not yet authorized to do, because the Spirit told them to. The church has to be ready to go in new directions, have our theology and our lives disrupted in ways we can’t predict.

That’s what happens in Acts. Peter violates the rules. The Jerusalem church listens and they all shift together. That’s the most striking thing to me in this text. It’s not that Peter violates kosher rules. The observant Jews I know make exceptions to rules all the time. The law offers that kind of flexibility. It offered it well before the church arrived on the scene. No, what’s striking about this text is that the church shifts its mission based on the testimony of one of their own about the Spirit he has witnessed in the lives of people the church hadn’t planned on reaching. The church changes its mission and its focus based on the experiences of its own people.

We’ve seen those shifts in our own congregation. The shift people started to make decades ago when people of the Way realized that racial segregation was a sin that damages people of all colors. The shift we made when the Spirit sent us to El Salvador to learn of the impact of our wars, and the stories of immigrants who comes to our land for survival. The shift we made when the stories of gay and lesbian people were heard and our congregation heard the Spirit telling the church not to make a distinction between them and us. The shift we are making today in hearing the testimony of returning citizens, of learning the truth of the generational inequalities in our city that we’re taking on together step by step.

Shifts that began with the experience of one or two or three testifying to the Spirit they had seen at work in a new place, in a way they’d never seen before, calling the church to engage or welcome or change. Calling the church to demonstrate its trust in the Spirit, a power than can’t be hindered by human beings.

And the only way a church can shift like that, away from its settled plans and into Spirit-led action, is by trusting each other. Learning how to listen to each other so that the trust that becomes evident in the church reflects the trust we have in God. Trust that enables us to stay on the Way, open to the next assignment, excited about the next challenge, thrilled to see where and who the Spirit is leading next.

I wonder, who’s next? Which prayer challenged disciple among us is going to find herself crossing boundaries she hadn’t expected to cross both announcing and witnessing God’s boundless, disruptive love? Which disciple is going to find himself in relationship with people he didn’t expect to know? Which ordinary disciple is going to find herself in the center of an encounter so beyond what is considered normal, that it has to be orchestrated by the Spirit?

And how we that encounter change us? How will we change and adapt and grow so that the church that we become continues to tell a story – not of the heroic exploits of super Christians, not of the skilled prayer practices or the social justice proficiencies of a few, but of the ever-expanding love of God. The radical grace of God which, the book of Acts testifies, can be seen in the hard-fought trust, the love that we learn to have for each other.