

Acts 11:1–18

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

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What God Has Made Clean

Very dry Presbyterian warning: I dreamed God told me to break tradition ... so naturally, I formed a committee to discuss it.

I'm here all week.

Peter didn't have that luxury. His dream pushed him straight into a crisis of faith — and a breakthrough of grace."

Three times, Peter hears it: "Get up, Peter; kill and eat."

Three times, he objects:

"By no means, Lord. Nothing unclean has ever entered my mouth."

And three times, the voice replies: "What God has made clean, you must not call unclean."

Peter's vision is strange — full of animals and a divine command to eat what he's always considered forbidden. But the story isn't really about food. It's about people.

It's about who belongs. It's about how God's love reaches far beyond our boundaries. And it's about what happens when the Spirit of God disrupts everything we thought we knew.

Peter thought he understood who was in and who was out. But God's revelation challenged even his most sacred assumptions.

Point 1: God's Spirit Moves Beyond Our Boundaries

Peter's experience in Acts 10–11 is a powerful reminder that God's Spirit is not limited by our categories. After the vision, Peter is sent to Cornelius, a Gentile, someone well outside his religious world. And yet, while Peter is still speaking, the Spirit falls. Just like it did at Pentecost.

Peter doesn't initiate this. He doesn't control it. He simply bears witness. "Who was I that I could hinder God?" he says.

That question still matters. Because we live in a world that draws lines — between the deserving and undeserving, the pure and impure, the in and the out. But God is still dismantling those lines.

Today, who might be our Cornelius? The queer teenager who wonders if there's a place at God's table. The undocumented parent raising kids in fear. The person in recovery, the person on the margins, the person who's heard "no" more often than "yes."

And the answer is still: "What God has made clean, you must not call unclean."

Listening — deep, prayerful, humble listening — is an act of faithfulness. Many of you know my journey in my previous church, and how we went from conservative evangelical to more progressive, open, and welcoming to all. Especially our LGBTQ beloved siblings. In an article I wrote in 2022, shortly after leaving that church I said the following:

When people ask me why we changed our mind in 2015 and became an affirming church, I say this: stories and statistics. Through listening and loving, I saw that my theology was demonstrably and unquestionably harming people. This kind of discovery is nothing new, the church has been answering the question "who is the gospel for?" throughout its checkered past and has a long history of "we were wrong" discoveries followed by repentance. One way to understand the New Testament is as a product of asking this question while it wrestled with the inclusion of Gentiles in the movement Jesus started.

When we take the time to hear each other's truths, to lay down our assumptions, and to remain open to one another, we join Peter on the same sacred path: moving from resistance to recognition, from guarding boundaries to embracing grace.

Point 2: The Church Is Always Being Transformed

Many people assume this is a story of Cornelius being converted. But really, it's Peter who is changed. Cornelius already feared God, prayed, and gave generously. Peter is the one who has to reimagine what faithfulness looks like. Peter is learning, where we draw lines, God builds bridges.

The church has always wrestled with change. Grace stretches us further than we're comfortable going. Jesus healed on the Sabbath, touched lepers, and dined with outcasts — showing that love outruns every rule. Even now, the church is called to keep growing, ever reforming. Not abandoning who we are, but going deeper into God's wideness. That takes courage. And it takes humility.

Our congregation has aged, and that brings both challenges and blessings. What if we saw this as a chance to do something bold, not to hold tightly to leadership, but to pass it on? Not because we're finished, but because we believe deeply in what's next. What if younger generations saw our longtime members not as fading voices, but as wells of wisdom and Spirit-tested faith—leading not by control, but by blessing what is yet to be with courage and grace?

For those in the later chapters of life, you are not a remnant — you are a well. A repository of wisdom, memory, and prayer. Your steady faith and lived experience ground us.

You've seen joy and sorrow. You've said goodbye to friends and loved ones. You know the losses that come with aging, the frustrations of a body that doesn't always cooperate. And yet — you remain. You still show up. You still love.

That is a form of leadership. Perhaps not loud or managerial, but sacred. It tells the next generation, "Stay faithful. Keep listening. The Spirit hasn't stopped speaking." We need every part of the Body of Christ as we move forward. Our older members remind us that the Spirit has been faithful through wars, recessions, pandemics, and upheavals. Younger generations bring a holy restlessness, asking questions that are uncomfortable and necessary. Both are part of God's movement in the world.

Point 3: Our Call Is to Witness, Not Hinder

When Peter sees the Spirit fall on Cornelius's household, it's before baptism, before profession, before policy. Gasp! That's a hard one for those of us who love everything to be done decently and in order! The Spirit moves first. The Spirit can be messy.

Peter's role isn't to gatekeep. It's to recognize and respond. That's the task of the church — not to control the flow of grace, but to testify to it.

That kind of witness takes trust. Trust that the Spirit really is working in ways we don't yet understand. Trust that if God is leading, we don't need to be afraid.

Can we trust the Spirit enough to follow it into unfamiliar territory?

Can we release our grip on control, even on legacy, and believe that the same God who has been faithful in our past is guiding the future?

Can we trust younger generations to lead this church as we give away power — even if our role shifts from direct management to being a well of memory, faith, and wisdom they can draw from?

The Listening Sessions led by the MSC team revealed a congregation that is thoughtful, brave, and deeply committed to renewal. We know change won't be easy — it means letting go of familiar patterns and stepping into the unknown. But even in the midst of vulnerability, there's a faithful resolve that it must be done. That quiet courage is a sign of Stone Church's readiness to be transformed.

There's a moment when Peter finishes his story, and no one says a word. Sometimes silence is the most faithful response we can offer to grace.

Then they begin to praise God. They say, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life." "Even to the Gentiles" — they aren't all the way there yet, but we'll take it!

That's what the church looks like at its best — not defensive, but open. Not grasping for control, but ready to be surprised by grace. When we create space at the table we once guarded, we become part of the resurrection story — God bringing life where there was death, unity where there was division, and joy where there was fear.

This story is not just about Peter and Cornelius. It's about us — especially those of us in communities like Stone Church, where the faith is deep, the traditions are cherished, and the future feels uncertain.

It's about a church learning — again and again — that God is not done with us. That the Spirit is still speaking. That love keeps pushing past the boundaries we thought were fixed.

The gospel is always opening new doors, stretching old wineskins, and calling even seasoned communities like ours to risk seeing differently — to risk growing again. To create new wineskins altogether.

So may we be like Peter, willing to tell the truth about what we've seen. Willing to admit when our categories are too small. Willing to say yes to the Spirit, even if it leads us where we've never been before.

May we be like the early church — courageous enough to go silent long enough to hear a new thing. Humble enough to say, "God is doing something here." And brave enough to follow — without hesitation.

And may we, as Stone Church, be a community that does not cling to the past out of fear, but carries our heritage into the future with openness, grace, and deep trust in the Spirit who is always out ahead of us. Amen.