

Mondovi: Our Savior's & Gilmanton United Methodist Churches
5.18.2025, 5th Sunday of Easter/ Heritage Sunday, Rev. Hyuntae Kim, Ph.D.
Who Was I to Stand in God's Way? Acts 11:1-18

Let us pray: Father, send upon us today the Holy Spirit whom You have promised. The same Spirit who came upon the household of Cornelius—come now upon us. Renew us and clothe us with power, that we may become witnesses of Jesus Christ, as Wesley was. We pray in the name of Jesus, who forgives our sins and makes us holy. Amen.

Today is Heritage Sunday. What is the heart of the legacy that we, as the Methodist Church, have received from God through the reformer and spiritual giant John Wesley? We can catch a glimpse of that central legacy through a famous warning Wesley gave in his 1786 writing, “Thoughts upon Methodism.” He said, “I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.”

Friends, if we're being honest and looking at the church today with clear eyes, we must admit that Wesley's concern has already become a reality in many ways. What is this “power” that Wesley was talking about? It is the power of the Holy Spirit. This is one of the most often overlooked aspects of the spiritual heritage Wesley left us.

Wesley first received assurance of salvation at Aldersgate, when his heart was “strangely warmed” while listening to the preface of Romans. That warmth and conviction came from the Holy Spirit within him. The following year, something even more remarkable happened. At Fetter Lane, around 3 a.m. during a time of prayer, the Holy Spirit descended powerfully upon the people gathered there. This moment is often called the Methodist Pentecost. From that point on, the Methodist revival movement began to spread with extraordinary power.

Why does the church receive the power of the Holy Spirit? It is to carry out the Great Commission of Jesus Christ: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). We cannot do this by human strength alone. It was only through the Spirit's power that the once fearful disciples became bold apostles. It was only by the Spirit's power that early Methodists could continue planting churches and transforming communities.

To be honest, the reason many churches today lack the Spirit's power is that we do not wait for the Holy Spirit the way Jesus commanded. Before His ascension, Jesus told His disciples not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for the gift the Father had promised—the Holy Spirit. If we truly desire to recover the power of the church, we must believe in this promise and wait earnestly until the Spirit comes upon us. How do we wait? We wait by worshiping, meditating on the Word, and praying. There is no shortcut. Without receiving the power of the Holy Spirit, anything we do by

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our own strength will be burdensome and bear little fruit, and the church will become nothing more than a man-made religious institution, like a club.

Yet we still have hope: we can wait for the Holy Spirit, and we can live as He leads us. God's promise is still valid and unchanging.

Today's passage from Acts 11 shows how the Holy Spirit broke through the prejudices of the Jewish believers and changed their mindset about the mission to the Gentiles. This moment marked a tremendous turning point in the history of the Church. What people could not do, the Holy Spirit accomplished—through those who were willing to obey.

All Jews, including Peter, had nothing to do with Gentiles. Influenced by their belief that Jews were God's holy people and that Gentiles were unclean, and because of their religious laws that forbade fellowship with Gentiles, they couldn't even conceive of evangelizing to them.

The people of Israel had a limited understanding of the promise God gave to their ancestor Abraham. God had promised that through one seed given to Abraham, all nations on earth would be blessed. That one seed is Christ, and whoever believes in Christ receives the blessing of becoming a child of God. That Christ has come. Before ascending into heaven, He promised to send the Holy Spirit. With His power, believers were to go and make disciples of all nations. Yet even after receiving the Holy Spirit, the believers struggled to obey this command. They remained bound by Jewish traditions and customs. So, God Himself took action to break down these barriers.

To break down this stronghold, God first prepared a Gentile named Cornelius. He was a centurion in the Roman army, part of the Italian Cohort—in modern terms, something like a company commander. He was a man who, along with his entire household, feared God, gave generously to the people, and prayed to God continually (Acts 10:2). In other words, Cornelius was a Gentile who believed in the God of Israel and was waiting for the coming of the Messiah. Instead of using his military power to oppress the conquered people of Israel, he showed compassion and generosity toward them. He also set regular times for prayer.

He received a visit from an angel during his 3 p.m. prayer. May we also develop a holy habit of diligently praying until an angel comes or we receive inspiration from the Holy Spirit.

The angel said to him: "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter... He will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household" (Acts 10:4, 13–14). So, Cornelius sent men to Joppa. While they were on their way, God began working on Peter's heart. The men from Caesarea (where Cornelius lived) arrived the next day at the house of Simon the tanner in Joppa, where Peter was staying.

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Just as they arrived—around noon—Peter went up to the roof to pray. During this time of prayer, he had a vision. He saw something like a large sheet being lowered from heaven by its four corners, and inside it were all kinds of animals that Jews considered unclean. Then a voice came, saying, “Rise, Peter, kill and eat.” The word “rise” here implies a decisive act. Peter, who was already hungry, might have wondered whether God was testing him. So, he replied strongly, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” Then a second time the voice said, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” This happened three times, and Peter was left wondering what the vision meant.

At that very moment, the men sent by Cornelius arrived. They asked the owner of the house—Simon the tanner—if a man named Simon who was called Peter was staying there. Peter, still upstairs, must have recognized from their voices that they were Gentiles. Since Jews did not associate with Gentiles, he didn’t go down right away, but continued pondering the meaning of the vision. Then the Holy Spirit said to him, “Three men are looking for you. Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them.” At that word, the meaning of the vision began to become clear to Peter. “Ah, those unclean animals must represent the Gentiles. God is accepting believers from every nation!”

Then Peter did something he never would have done before—he invited the Gentiles to stay overnight. The next day, he set out with them to Cornelius’s house, taking six Jewish brothers along with him. Most likely, he brought them as witnesses.

Cornelius, meanwhile, had gathered his relatives and close friends in expectation. When Peter arrived, he shared with them the good news of peace. He proclaimed Jesus Christ as the Lord of all. This was Peter’s realization—that Jesus is the Lord of all people, not just the Lord of the Jews.

As Peter was preaching, the Gentiles repented of their sins, were born again, and received the Holy Spirit—in the same way the disciples had experienced at Pentecost. They even spoke in tongues and praised God. From Peter’s perspective, this was astonishing. After all, they—the Jewish disciples—had gone through three years of discipleship and even prayed for ten more days before the Holy Spirit came. But these Gentiles, simply by hearing the word, immediately repented, were born again, and received the Spirit! What a quick and powerful work of God! It shows how urgent this mission to the Gentiles was for the Lord.

Normally, people would repent, be baptized with water, and then receive the Holy Spirit. But in this case, the Holy Spirit came first. So Peter, seeing this, naturally ordered them to be baptized with water as well. According to their request, Peter stayed with them a few more days, enjoying fellowship and encouraging them in their new faith.

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When the apostles and the brothers in Jerusalem heard about what had happened, they criticized Peter upon his return. Their fixed mindset hadn't yet been broken. Peter patiently explained everything. He made it clear that he had not gone on his own initiative, but that he had been led by the Holy Spirit.

Peter knew that unless he explained everything in detail, their way of thinking would not be transformed. But once it was, they would also understand that the gospel was meant to go to Samaria and even to the ends of the earth as Jesus promised in Acts 1:8.

This is the life of the church—to go where the Holy Spirit leads, rather than simply living as we always have. Religion is bound by tradition, seeking only to follow past practices. However, the church was established by God to reach all nations. If we build a church building and remain confined within it, no great works will take place. The purpose of the church is not to simply dwell comfortably among ourselves. If we do, Acts 1:8 will not be fulfilled.

Peter says to the brothers in Jerusalem, “I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit’” (Acts 11:16). Peter was recalling what Jesus had said just before ascending into heaven in Acts 1:4–5. That moment of remembering the Word—that, too, is a way the Holy Spirit speaks.

Peter continues: “If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?” (Acts 11:17). This word shatters the stronghold of Jewish superiority—the idea of being God's exclusive, holy people—and breaks the mindset bound by Jewish law. The Jewish believers in Jerusalem also came to recognize and accept that God had granted repentance that leads to life, that is, salvation—even to the Gentiles.

The Cornelius event caused a massive turning point: the gospel, which had been preached only to the Jews, began to be opened to the Gentiles. As a result, the Antioch church, which was a daughter church of Jerusalem and had previously only evangelized to Jews, began preaching to Gentiles as well. Through this Antioch church, many churches among the Gentiles were later planted.

I bless and pray that strongholds within us may be broken and shattered. May the strongholds of religious spirits, the mindset of being confined within the church, and the complacency of living without spreading the gospel be broken by the grace of the Holy Spirit within our hearts today. I encourage you to draw near to the Lord through the points of contact with the Holy Spirit—the Word, worship, and prayer. May you receive the power of the Holy Spirit like Peter and Cornelius and become witnesses of Jesus Christ. Amen!