**[1]** Fifth Sunday after Easter, May 18, 2025
Sermon Title:  What God Has Made Clean …
Scripture: [Acts 11:1-18](https://disciples.org/resources/lectionary/?weeks=10)
Theme:  Peter crosses over the traditional boundaries between Gentile and Jew, extending the boundaries of who is qualified to be baptized by the Holy Spirit.

**[2]** They had practically, for all intents and purposes, thrown Jesus out of the Decapolis, after the incident with some two-thousand (2,000) swine, with ‘unclean spirits’ rushing over the cliff into the sea and being drowned there. The Decapolis was a league of ten (10) Greek cities located just east of the Sea of Galilee, who had formed a collective identity to govern themselves as long as they were sufficiently loyal to Rome. The archaeology of the region suggests that each city was
a little mini-hub of Greek culture with theaters, colonnaded streets, and temples to Greek gods **[3]** and a shared coinage accepted in each of the ten cities. But, the swine owners came out to the
site where the herds of swine had drowned and told Jesus: “We don’t want you here, go away!”
Jesus agreed to leave, but then sent out as a witness a powerful man, once a demoniac named “Legion,” while in his wrong mind, NOW with a new UNIFIED name while in his right mind.
He was healed from his destructive life of misery into a constructive life of gratitude and harmony, from a life where no boundaries were observed into a life where healthy boundaries were cherished and observed. Jesus sent him as a witness to the Decapolis, where he was not being allowed to go, to his friends who were amazed at his story of change, and likely accepted his proclamation on behalf of Jesus. ‘Tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and about the mercy God has shown you.’

**[4]** The month of May is Mental Health Awareness Month, where we emphasize the many
resources available to help us move from our “disturbed minds” to our “right minds.” I have made copies of what our National Benevolent Association in the Disciples of Christ provides for us to read and promote for Mental Health Awareness and these are available in the narthex and the church office. The message for this month is three-fold:1) Let’s work harder at reducing the stigma associated with mental illness, 2) Let’s make people aware of programs like Mental Health First Aid, available for both youth and adults, to local schools, law enforcement, paramedics, fire-fighters, churches, and many others will know what can be the first response to those they encounter in their environments who are struggling with acute forms of anxiety and depression, trauma and moral injury, and 3) Let’s find rituals and ceremonies that bless our healing and promote belonging and welcome in our community. These are all good goals for promoting Easter and resurrection in our world.

Continuing on with other biblical stories beyond the Decapolis which promote the acceptance of diversity and inclusion, that take us beyond the boundaries of Israel, to the Gentiles, to the world of Pentecost which transcends all boundaries.

**[5]** In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus speaks to a Syro-phoenician woman (Mark 4:243-26) whose daughter had an unclean spirit, a disturbed spirit. Perhaps, he spoke to her as he did the Samaritan woman at the well as when he called for her to worship God beyond geography, neither in Samaria or Jerusalem, but in a place beyond both. At first, Jesus is reluctant to speak to the woman begging him to heal her daughter, mumbling something about salvation being for the Jews only. But the Syro-phoenician woman persists in her pleading, and their spirits lift each other up to a higher plain, her spirit ministering to Jesus, and his spirit to hers. And Jesus begins to expand his understanding of his mission to all peoples.

**[6]** And, then, there is this strange reference in the Gospel of John (12:20-21) where it was recorded that certain Greeks came to Philip during the Passover Feast in Jerusalem, asking to see Jesus. “Sir, we want to see Jesus.’ Since Philip had a Greek sounding name and was known to be from Bethsaida in Galilee, they naturally assumed he would understand and take them to meet Jesus. We are not told whether they were able to meet with Jesus, but Jesus does imply that the world was quickly changing in the moment and that they should leave aside the human glory that separates people in exchange for the divine glory that unites (12:43). The message Jesus was proclaiming was intended for all nations and not just the nation of Israel.

Isaiah 49:6
 “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

So, Peter has a background and purpose to his Easter sermons, some of which we find in the Book of Acts, a fresh proclamation of the message he has experienced first-hand with Jesus
and the other disciples, as their leader and colleague. It is, therefore, not strange at all that Peter would be staying with Simon the Tanner in Joppa, where he could meet regularly with a diversity of people from sea and land alike. It’s very much in keeping with what Jesus would do.

**[7]**  In today’s scripture, Simon Peter is reporting to the church in Jerusalem about his recent experience in proclaiming the simple Gospel of the Kin[g]dom to Gentiles, and how it had resulted in a pouring out of the Spirit in baptism. Let us say, and not take lightly, that there are serious concerns in Jerusalem about the compromising of the faith in the words and action Peter has taken. It all started with a visit from Cornelius, a centurion, a soldier, and not just any soldier, but a leader of the famous Italian Cohort from Rome. Even though his words do not show up in our copy of the report, I have to imagine that Peter reports of him that he is “an upright and God-fearing man, well-spoken of by the whole Jewish nation.”  (Acts 10:22) Also,
that “he gave alms generously and prayed constantly to God.” (Acts 10:2). Peter then summarized his controversial Easter sermon for his Jerusalem questioners. Their questions were still fresh on their lips: “why did you meet with the uncircumcised, and then stay and eat with them, and even preach to them, and heaven only knows, baptize them?” Peter, have you lost your mind?

**[8]** Peter responds that “God’s Spirit has shown him that he (Peter) should not call anyone profane or unclean, that he really should NOT dis-associate himself from Gentiles like Cornelius.  Peter also reflects the message of God’s angel that greets him on the roof of Simon-the-Tanner’s house while he is praying:  “What God has made clean, you must not call profane, Peter.” Then, Peter sums up his Easter proclamation: that “God shows no partiality.”  (God does not play favorites). In every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God. God is Lord of all.   God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power as Jesus went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by evil. Peter is a witness to all of these things. God has commanded Peter to preach to the people about the goodness and mercy of God and testify to what he has seen and heard from Jesus, that forgiveness and reconciliation are in abundant measure through Jesus the Anointed One. I can imagine that Peter might have added some words from Jesus himself:

“it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles…For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. Our ancient proverb tells us that this is why we guard our hearts so closely, so that the overflow is good and productive for our living” (Mt 15:11; Lk 6:45; Prov. 4:23).

**[9]** You may recall that Peter’s report has some discrepancies from the original experience recorded in Acts chapter 10. Three men sent by Cornelius have magically become six brothers (10:7; 10:19; 11:12). Cornelius had chosen two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, to go and find Peter at Simon-the-Tanner’s house in Joppa. Now, in Peter’s report these have become six brothers. God’s Spirit has strange ways of doubling then changing our vision. However, even if he has forgotten the physical details, he has remembered the spiritual ones: “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon [my Gentile audience] just as it had upon us at the beginning.” (11:15) It was the original Pentecost revisited! God was doing a new thing! Just look at it! “God has given [these Gentiles] the same gift that he gave us when we first believed. Who are we to hinder the Holy Spirit? These that I baptized, I baptized into the repentance that leads to everlasting life!

As un-hearable as Peter’s vision might be for those listening in the first century, for those circumcised in the Jerusalem church, it surely was NOT ANY MORE un-hearable than the story
the 2,000 swine jumping off the cliff into the Sea of Galilee where many had thrown their nets hoping to catch and eat fish. But, once you have heard something, it is difficult, if not impossible, to un-hear it, or to erase it from memory. What we hear all too often becomes part of us despite our best intentions of fleeing away from it.

Peter was not preaching to the choir that day, nor to those saying ‘Amen’ on the edges. He was preaching to those who needed to hear the healing message of belonging, to the diffusion of the boundaries between sinners and saints. Zachaeus, the tax collector, the Samaritan woman at the well, the rich young ruler, the woman caught in adultery, all of these needed to hear the message of belonging and acceptance.  Jesus showed his love and shared his gospel with those outside the social network of the scribes and Pharisees.  As much as we would like to love just those who love us, we are called beyond by the cross to also love our enemies and those who do not love us. We are called beyond believers to non-believers. We are called to a world beyond like-mindedness and agreement to witness to a world in dis-agreement. And while I would prefer to shelter all children from a world that would put them in danger and lead them astray,  I am called to trust them in their freedom that they will make the right decisions and set examples in the world for others to follow.  It is never easy to send our children into the world with only a wing and a prayer. And it can only be right to protect them as long as we can from inexperience and indecision. But, neither can we live our lives through our children. They must be free. Indeed, God made them free in the divine image.

**[10]** Martin Luther King, Jr., in one of his famous sermons from Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, spoke of those who dared to preach the gospel as “crazy.”  People will call you ‘crazy’ for following Jesus, for preaching against racism or greed, hate or violence. But, so be it, I must preach ‘crazy,’ to remain sane. This is the crazy part of ministry.  Jerram Barrs writes:  “Jesus reminds us that all human persons are made in God’s image, that all have dignity.  He also teaches us that it is deeply dishonoring to the Lord when we live separating ourselves from those whom he has made, those whom he treasures, and those whom he is eager to save.”   (p. 46).

**[11]** In 2 Corinthians 6:11, Paul writes: “We have opened our hearts wide for you; there is no restriction in our affections—open wide your own hearts also.”    These are hardly the words of isolation and hard-heartedness. They are the words of welcome and invitation, the words of good news to all people, sinners and saints, Gentiles and Jews, male and female, young and old, to those on the near and far sides of our world. Open wide your own hearts and do not put restrictions on your affections.  Invest in diversity and inclusion! Cast the seed of the gospel in all directions and in all types of soil. Wait upon God to reap the plentiful harvest. Alleluia!  Amen.