

SERMON TITLE: "Acts of the Spirit: Freedom of the Spirit"
SERMON TEXT: Acts 11:1-18
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: July 4, 2021, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

An annual tradition that I've come to love every Fourth of July is the reading of the Declaration of Independence on National Public Radio. Every year when those expressive and familiar voices read our founding document, I feel goosebumps on my arms and pride in my heart. It truly is a wonderful thing that our nation was founded on the hopes, dreams, and declaration of independence.

But when I heard the Declaration read on Friday, there was something different. Before this year's reading, a commentator made some points about the Declaration's statement that "all men are created equal." Obviously, she said, the nation's founders didn't include women in that idea. It would be a long time yet before women would have property rights and the freedom to vote. And, before the final draft of the Declaration was signed, some anti-slavery wording was removed, so as not to offend those potential signers who certainly didn't want to consider their African slaves as equals in independence. Nor did the founding fathers consider the native inhabitants of this land as their equals. Instead, the Declaration refers to them as "merciless Indian Savages."

Obviously, our nation has had and still has many flaws. As much as we Americans love our country, it's important for us to recognize the mistakes we've made, how far we've come, and how far we have yet to go. Independence is an ideal not yet fully realized. As we rightfully celebrate our nation's amazing successes, we also do well to admit that freedom is a work in progress.

What's true for our nation is also true for our religious faith. There's always room to grow in the category of freedom. Fortunately, today's scripture reading from Acts 11 addresses this very subject. In fact, you could call it an Independence Day story, complete with an Independence Day menu, guests, and some fireworks.

1--INDEPENDENCE DAY MENU

Are any of you having a BBQ or picnic later today? Will you be eating some special holiday food? I saw a picture the other day of a 4th of July flag cake. It had white frosting, raspberries for the reds stripes, and blueberries in the upper left corner for the sky-with-stars. Well, the story in Acts 11 started with an Independence Day menu too.

The freedom of the Spirit story that we've just read from Acts 11:1-18 is a summarized version of what happened in the 48 verses of Acts 10. But, even in the summarized version, we are told that Peter was in the city of Joppa. And while he was praying and hungrily waiting for dinner to be prepared, he fell into a trance. In this dreamlike state, he saw a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners. When Peter looked more closely, he saw that the sheet was holding all kinds of animals—"four-footed [ones], beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air." And Peter heard a voice telling him to get up, kill the animals, and eat.

For those of us who enjoy a good meat-lovers BBQ, that probably sounds alright. Even if we're a bit squeamish about the reptiles, there would be enough other options to choose from. But Peter was taken aback by the vision. As a practicing Jew, he couldn't eat certain kinds of meat. Pork was off limits. Reptiles weren't kosher. And many other creatures were prohibited, as well. So, of course, Peter objected to this instruction to eat those unclean animals.

Peter knew that the voice was from the Lord, but maybe it was a test to see if Peter would give in to temptation because he was so hungry. But then the voice came from heaven again, in verse nine, this time saying, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Three times this instruction came to Peter to eat from these unclean animals, and then the sheet of creatures was lifted back up to heaven. Since it was a vision in a trance, Peter didn't have to do anything yet. He didn't actually have to eat those creatures. But this Independence Day menu was now fresh in his mind, and it was the first step toward freedom of the Spirit.

2—INDEPENDENCE DAY GUESTS

Are any of you having guests at your house today, or are you going to be a guest at someone else's Fourth of July party? Well, the next factor in this Independence Day story was the arrival of guests. Acts 11:11 tells us that, at that very moment when Peter's trance was finished, three men arrived from Caesarea. From the longer version of the story in Acts 10, we know that those men had been sent from Caesarea by Cornelius, who was a centurion of the Italian Cohort. Cornelius was not Jewish. He was a Gentile. But he was a pious Gentile who worshiped God and was open to further learning. Like Peter, Cornelius had had a vision. In his vision, an angel of God had told him to send for Peter. So Cornelius did that. He sent two slaves and a soldier to go fetch Peter and bring him to Cornelius' house.

Under normal circumstances, Peter would never would have considered accepting these people as guests, and he certainly wouldn't have agreed to travel back to Cornelius' house with them. Peter and his fellow Jews of that time would have considered Gentiles to be spiritually unclean. Prior to this day, Peter would have believed it against God's righteous laws to spend time with such persons. An upright and straight-arrow Jew wouldn't dream of defiling himself in that way. Even if the Gentiles in question were pious, even if they prayed, and even if they worshiped God—surely they were outside of God's covenant. Because the Gentiles ate by different dietary laws and because they were uncircumcised, Peter and the other apostles wouldn't have been able to imagine the Gentiles as being part of their same spiritual family.

But now Peter realized what the vision about food meant. That Independence Day menu was not for him to eat, but for him to apply to this new situation. In his mind, Peter heard again God's words, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." And Peter realized what God was trying to tell him. As we read in verse 12, "The Spirit told [Peter] to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us." In the freedom of the Spirit, Peter could and should welcome and spend time

with these Independence Day guests because God was changing the rules. God was now calling them clean. And, so, in verse 12 we read that Peter and six Jewish brothers agreed to travel with the Gentile men back to Cornelius' house in Caesarea. Because of the freedom of the Spirit, Peter and his friends became the Independence Day guests.

3—INDEPENDENCE DAY FIREWORKS

The third way this Independence Day story demonstrates the freedom of the Spirit is in Independence Day fireworks. Of course, I don't mean that literally. There were no imports of Chinese gun-powder explosives. And, like us here in drought-stricken Utah, the Spirit wasn't lighting any pyrotechnics. The Pentecost flames of Acts 2 were now past. But it was time to blow up a few misconceptions and limitations in a dazzling display. And that's exactly what the Holy Spirit did.

Once Peter and his group arrived at Cornelius' house, Peter began to speak his message from God. We get the fullest description of this message in Acts 10:34-43. There, Peter told Cornelius and the other Gentiles that God had disrupted his previous thinking. The narrow beliefs that Peter had grown up with would have excluded this meeting of people and sharing of the good news. But with the vision of God and God's voice of explanation, the Holy Spirit had blown a big hole in the wall of separation between them. The Spirit had demonstrated that "God shows no partiality," but embraces all different kinds of people.

Peter then shared his message about Jesus. Peter told them how Jesus had gone about doing good and healing the sick. Peter told about Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. And Peter explained "that *everyone* who believes in [Jesus] receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

If there were any lingering doubts that *everyone* meant *everyone*, the freedom of the Spirit came through again. Peter, his Jewish-Christian companions, and later the apostles back in Jerusalem were all astounded and amazed that the Holy Spirit was then poured out upon Cornelius and the Gentiles who were there. As Cornelius and his friends began speaking in tongues and extolling God, the

initial concerns, complaints, and objections of the Jewish Christians were silenced. It was clear that the Holy Spirit was exploding the old rules and limitations and sending out bright fireworks in the sky for all to see. No longer was God's love and mercy going to be kept locked up with just the Jews or even with the Jewish Christians. As Peter said in Acts 10:47, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" The sacred rites and incorporating rituals of the church were now available to anyone who believed in Jesus. The freedom of the Spirit to include everyone was bursting out in a glorious Independence Day display.

CONCLUSION

I'm sure you're familiar with this song. "Oh, freedom, oh, freedom,/ Oh freedom over me/ And before I'd be a slave/ I'll be buried in my grave/ And go home to my Lord and be free." That song was first sung around the end of the Civil War, and it was very popular during the Civil Rights era of the 1960s. It expresses the universal human urge to be free.

Apparently, freedom is also an urge of the Holy Spirit. Over the past weeks, we've seen that the Holy Spirit can't be contained. It wasn't stopped by Jesus' death or by his ascension to heaven. Instead, the Holy Spirit just kept moving forward through the succession of the Spirit, the empowerment of the Spirit, the witness of the Spirit, the gift of the Spirit, the message of the Spirit, the fathers of the Spirit, and the guidance of the Spirit. The Spirit moved among the Jews and the Jewish converts and then to the Gentiles near and far. As we have seen in this Independence Day story, not even the prohibitions of the righteous Jewish law could suppress the freedom of the Spirit.

The Spirit of God goes where it will. The question for us is, will we go there too? Will we choose to be a part of this freedom of the Spirit?