



**Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church**  
*Connecting faith with everyday life*

## Sermon Archives

Date: April 24, 2016

Title: "How Wide!"

Scripture: Acts 11:1-18

Description: Through the event of Peter going to Cornelius, God continues the story. God is always expanding and including, never contracting and exclusive.

While I was in seminary, I learned a set of new words. I don't get to use those words much, but today I'm going to trot them out and play with them. I learned there is a difference between transubstantiation and consubstantiation when we come to the communion table, and sometimes when people don't choose the right word they aren't allowed at the table. I learned that the substitutionary theory of the atonement was a product of the feudal age and it replaced an earlier theory called Christus Victor, which was actually more scriptural than the substitutionary theory. This was important to know. It could not only determine your salvation, it could also determine your grade!

After I passed the Ordination Exams and became a bona fide, card-carrying clergy, I was assigned the task of visiting people in the hospitals. I called on a young couple who were waiting to learn if their newborn child had survived heart surgery. As I entered, they stood in the corner of the room, holding each other. I held my briefcase, packed with my freshly scrubbed set of words, newly minted and barely used, but thoroughly polished and ready for display. For some reason, that couple was not very interested when I began to explain the difference between the substitutionary theory of atonement and the Christus Victor theory. They wanted peace, and safety, and care, and their little baby to be okay.

Later I visited a gentleman who made Jerry Falwell sound like a godless liberal. Actually, his wife was the patient. She had cancer that would give her a couple of months to live. They'd had over fifty years together, and he didn't know if he could survive after she was gone. He didn't ask me about my view on the inerrancy of scripture, and before we prayed together, I didn't find out if he was premillennial, postmillennial, or a-millennial.

The next time I visited the hospital, I just left my briefcase of words in the car. They just weren't much help to folks who were thirsty for peace, grace, healing, and God's love.

Back in Jerusalem, the church leaders called Peter to appear before the Official Council. “You can’t be offering baptism and God’s Spirit on people who haven’t met the criteria,” they instructed. “These Romans— they haven’t been circumcised. They’ll eat anything. Do we need to call Holly back up here to read what the Bible says about diet?” One of the Council members pointed out as a matter of fact, *Holly* shouldn’t be reading to us at all, because the scriptures instruct that women...”

Peter said, “This wasn’t my idea! God told me to go to them and not to make a distinction between those guys and us. God has shown me that I should not call anyone unclean. *Anyone*. Now, literally, the vision was about animals, and about what could be eaten and not eaten, but Peter got the message: it was about people. It was about who you can include and not include. The vision had scarcely faded when two Roman soldiers knocked at the door.

God is constantly expanding, pushing out the boundaries. God doesn’t close ranks and reduce forces; God constantly expands. The dietary rules in the Old Testament were very clear and very specific. But in Peter’s vision, God appears to have changed. The Spirit told me not to make a distinction, not to call anyone profane or unclean.”

This long story in two chapters of the Book of Acts reflects one of the things that is at the heart of PHPC. We have incredible music here. We have one of the best educational programs for adults and children I know of. We have an impressive youth ministry. But the thing that makes PHPC who we are is something in you, something you embody.

Here’s what it is: we have people here who affirm that what you believe matters more than anything else. They believe the Bible is the inspired word of God and that Jesus died to forgive your sins. If you are that kind of person, you belong here. There are also people who don’t know if they believe any of that. Some days they aren’t even sure they believe in God. They love Jesus, but don’t think he was born of a virgin. They hear the story of Jonah being swallowed by a fish and they laugh and say, “That’s a good one! Tell me another! There’s no way that is real.” They do want to change the world, however, by helping one person at a time, and they don’t mind helping in God’s name. If that’s you, you belong here, just as you are.

There are people who believe the Presbyterian Church abandoned all Biblical truth when they voted to affirming same-sex marriage. There are people who believe that in that vote, Presbyterians finally affirmed God’s justice and the call to follow Christ’s ministry of reconciliation. If you are either of those, you belong here.

Do you realize how rare that is? In the political arena in America today, disagreements are accompanied by name-calling and sometimes pushing and shoving. What happened to the civility in civil discourse? If you’re part of a neighborhood Homeowners Association you can get in some intense disputes over proposed

improvements and assessments. Maybe no one moves out, but people don't speak for years. Here our differences are accepted and embraced. They're part of what makes our life together rich, part of what makes our life together a God-thing.

We have people who have spent part of this year in jail, and people who believe that we need to get tough on crime. There are people among us who begin each day by reading the Bible. There are people who are pacifists and vegans. They drive hybrid cars and they believe in truth, but not absolute truth. They'd rather teach a Hindu how to read than study about how to get into heaven.

We have people here who are trapped in the cycle of addiction and they have days they want out and days when their addiction is their best friend and they'd like to stay in it just this one more time. If that's you, you need to know you belong here.

There are people who are divorced and remarried and divorced again. They sit with people who have been married 47 years and people who have never been married, and you belong here.

There are people who wear skinny jeans and really cool glasses and only listen to music nobody has ever heard of, and people who spent an hour and a half getting themselves looking good before they came here, and if that's you...welcome...and you are looking fine. There are people who don't know what skinny jeans are, or who, like me, should never wear skinny jeans. And you belong here.

There are people who are rich, powerful, good-looking and who like themselves. There are people who are behind in their payments, this close to being foreclosed, have been beaten by the ugly stick, have no health care insurance, and who don't like themselves at all. You belong here. You are welcome here.

There are people who have given large sums of money to the church and who keep us going financially, and people who haven't given a dime even once, and you belong here, just as you are.

There are even people who don't fit any of the descriptions I've named, and others who've thought, "Ouch, you got me!" with every description, and the good news is, you belong here just as you are.

Do you understand what makes this so powerful? Part of the power is that it is so unusual. We do this Sunday after Sunday, without making a lot of noise about it, so we begin to take it for granted and say, "It's just us being us." It is so much more than that; it is the power of the living and loving Christ embodied in you. It lives in you. It isn't my idea, and it isn't a strategy for church growth. It is God's Spirit leading us and bringing us together the way Peter and Cornelius were brought together. For them and for us, it's a God thing.

It includes serious disagreement over important issues. If we didn't disagree, and if it didn't matter, we'd lose the heart of who we are in Christ, because then, we'd

all be the same. The disagreements among us foster our opportunities to extend grace. When we practice grace, we get peace. Underneath there is a unity that makes us one.

“The Spirit told me not to make a distinction,” Peter explains to the Church Council. I can preach that, but a sermon is just words; you live it. It is unbelievably rare. I’m telling you, the world needs Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church. The Spirit of this church is here only because it lives in you, among you. It isn’t easy to do. To have so many differences in so many ways, to disagree so strongly about so many things, and yet to embrace one another in love.

can preach that, but it’s just preaching. It has to be lived. It has to be real. You make it real. You inspire me, and I love you for it. You give grace, you receive peace. Grace and peace be to you all.

Once again, as is so often in this series on Acts, the inspiration for this sermon—and much of its material—come from the preaching of Shane Hipps at Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. [www.marshill.org](http://www.marshill.org).