

## ***Step by Step***

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

May 18, 2025 – A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship

The 5th Sunday of Eastertide

Text: Acts 11:1-18

Some of you know that when I first began in ministry it was as a Minister of Christian Education and Family Life. I loved it and, in fact, I knew pretty early on in life that what I really wanted to be when I grew up was a professional Sunday School Teacher. Only problem was that no such profession existed. This I had figured out before I even finished elementary school. But that thought never quite left me. So, by the time I began college and realized that a Religion major was an option, I was beyond excited. I even used several of my electives to craft an independent study/internship at a Vacation Bible School at a local Presbyterian Church near my college. This was back in the 70's when it was not an unusual situation for VBS's to have 200 kids enrolled for a period of 3 weeks. Such was the case for this one. My how times have changed.

By the time I graduated, I once again realized that a profession in my chosen field of Christian Education was a non-starter, so I instead took a job in the offices of a local real estate developer and spent an incredible 9 years managing this organization which my boss grew from one office with 3 agents to 24 offices with 300 agents in that 9 year period. It was the 80's and I had my very own real life "Mad Men" experience. But that is a topic for another sermon on another day. When Peter took a job here, we moved to Rhode Island in 1985 and have been here ever since, loving every minute of it. After a brief stint as a manager with a temporary employment agency, I finally had the opportunity to return to my dream job – as the Director of Christian Education for a large UCC church. I was in heaven!!! This proved to be exactly the professional opportunity I had been hoping for and long given up hope of ever finding. It didn't pay very much and when I took the job, I cut our family income by 50% but Peter was incredibly supportive, and we agreed we'd find a way to make it work. And we did. It wasn't easy for sure, but we did it.

While I was working in this role, several incredible opportunities came my way including the chance to write professionally for several different curriculum publishers as well as traveling to major events for those of us pursuing the educational profession within the church structures. These events were absolutely incredible. Amazingly creative worship, networking opportunities, training seminars on everything from educational theory adapted to the church and to using ice breakers as starting points for group efforts for all ages.

Through these opportunities I eventually had the opportunity to be trained as a congregational church consultant through the Alban Institute, again learning how to facilitate various forms of group interactions to help congregations figure out where they were presently and where they hoped to go. I traveled all over Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New Hampshire doing these consultations. While all this was going on, I also became involved with the professional organization for church educators serving as president at both the regional and national levels. In short, I was what you would call “a player” in my chosen profession because I built it one step at a time. I loved what I did. I was respected by my peers. I had what I thought I always wanted.

However, I was starting to realize there was so much more I wanted to do, that I knew I could do, but no one was giving me the chance to do it. Not really. Gradually I realized that in order to do what I felt God was calling me to do, I needed to go back to school to earn the educational credentials I needed to pursue ordination. Again, this is a long and involved story which is not the point of this morning. Suffice to say, I decided if I was going to do this, I was going to go all the way, so I applied to Harvard Divinity School. And the rest of that journey is what brought me here to you as your pastor.

I thank God every day for every step of the journey my life has been for me. From my perspective at this point in my life – one of the biggest perks as one gets older – is being able to reflect back on the entirety of our lives. When we do this with grateful hearts, we can discern God’s guidance through so many things which have made us who we are and brought us to this point in our lives. This is a gradual, step by step process. And it’s what I want us to reflect on together today – this whole recognition that life is for all of us a journey that we make, one step at a time. As the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said, “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”<sup>1</sup> This has certainly been true for me, and I know it has been for you as well for the simple reason that this is how life is for everyone. It unfolds, step by step. Sometimes our steps are well planned, but more often than not, it is the vagaries of life that place us on one path or another. How we negotiate our path through life also changes as our lives change. What was just fine when we were young and starting out – like a studio apartment with a murphy bed like Peter and I had in our first apartment – no longer meets your needs as life moves forward. That only makes sense. What we seldom stop to think about, though, is how our step by step progress through life makes room for God, or not. In the everyday business that is life, it

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_journey\\_of\\_a\\_thousand\\_miles\\_begins\\_with\\_a\\_single\\_step](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_journey_of_a_thousand_miles_begins_with_a_single_step)

is just too easy to lose sight of the transformational possibilities our walk with God through life makes possible. Life just happens, but faith takes some intentionality and that, dear ones, we too often forget.

This is my particular take-away from the Scripture text we read this morning from Acts in chapter 11. Again, this is a well-known story – I can still remember the illustrations of Peter’s vision of the sheet filled to overflowing with unclean animals God instructs him to “kill and eat.” I remember thinking at the time what an odd story it was when I was a child, especially since none of us lived on farms where animals were routinely slaughtered for food. The notion of killing an animal just to eat it was horrifying. I think one of the girls in my class actually cried! But the boys thought it was pretty cool. I just remember thinking, “yuck.” Of course, the whole point of that part of the story was for Peter to understand as a result of this dramatic vision that the old dietary restrictions imposed by the Old Testament laws were no longer valid in this new understanding of God which Jesus had provided to them. But, that’s not what I’d like us to focus on from this text this morning.

The verse which speaks most powerfully to me in this text comes in verse 4 as Peter proceeds to answer the question which had been posed to him when he returned to Jerusalem from a trip he had made to meet with some folks anxious to learn about Jesus. His trip had been very successful, which these Jerusalem leaders had heard. However, instead of being excited about these new people wanting to know about Jesus, they questioned him about why he had gone to people who were uncircumcised in the first place. In other words, they were asking him why he had been with Gentiles at all. That’s when the text describes Peter’s response in this way in verse 4: “Then, Peter began to explain it to them, step by step.” This is when the whole story of his vision of the unclean animals is outlined. This is then followed by the reason he took the trip they were questioning him about. Three men from Caesarea showed up at his house the moment the vision ended. He states, “The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.” Then Peter tells what happened, step by step by, as he visited with the people that God had sent him to. The clincher comes when Peter reports that “the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us in the beginning.” Finally, he says to his questioners, “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to hinder God?” The text tells us that after hearing this from Peter, “they were silenced.”

Step by step Peter explained his answers to their question about why he had chosen to be with people they found to be unacceptable for the simple reason that they were not circumcised. In other words, they were not of the Jewish faith. In these early days of the Christian movement (it was still a long way away from being an organized independent religion), the original disciples and early believers were all Jewish. This isn't surprising because Jesus had originally come with the intent of reforming Judaism, not of starting a new religion. But, when not all Jews were enthusiastic or supportive of his ideas of reform, a sort of split or schism opened up in that community. So, by this time in the post-Jesus world of the apostles of which Peter was the recognized leader, there was no clarity on whether or not those who wanted to follow Jesus had to be Jews first. Some of the early believers said yes, some said no. This particular incident our text describes in such step by step detail is when that schism took the first step in becoming an entirely new religious movement, separating itself from the more restrictive of the Mosaic laws. Slowly Jesus' followers were recognizing that dietary restrictions did not make anyone more or less worthy of loving God and being transformed by that relationship. Physical differences – like circumcised vs. un- circumcised – didn't matter either. Only the person's heart and their desire to devote themselves to this new life animated by the Holy Spirit, empowered by the teachings of Jesus and undergirded with God's unconditional love mattered. Dear ones, this was indeed a radical moment in the evolution of what we now know as the church. This is where things really started to ramp up!

Okay, fine. But what does all this have to do with me, with us, right here and right now. I think what can be most helpful here is to look for where we can see ourselves in this story. For example, I think we've all had those moments of consternation when we're all excited about something we've accomplished only to have the powers that be question why it happened in the first place. So we can respect that rather than becoming angry and defensive at the question thrown at him, Peter chose instead a logical and methodical approach to answering them. He answered them so well that his critics were silenced by his words! As we think about this part of the story, we might also reflect on how often we could be disappointing those who come to us with their joys, or their concerns, only to be greeted by responses from us that are – shall we say – less than thoughtful. We've all done it! Our spouse or our child comes home all worked up about a near miss they've just had in the car and our first response is something like, "Why did that happen? What were you doing there? Were you speeding?" Or

someone we're working with on a project makes a suggestion we don't agree with so our immediate response to them is, "that will never work!" Knee-jerk negative is what I have come to call this seemingly automatic response so many of us have in these situations. I don't think we intend to be negative. In fact, I'm sure we don't. But all those life experiences kick in and without even realizing it we skip the step of affirming the other person's current reality and jump right into questioning their response. If we're being honest, we have to admit to ourselves that we do this kind of stuff all the time. I know I do.

We might also identify with the folks who visit Peter asking him to come with them to talk with folks in their home community who want more information on Jesus. Let's face it, folks. If someone ever asked you to tell them about Jesus, what would you say? Would you be able to answer that question? What if they asked you about our church? Or, horror of horrors, what if you dared to bring up our church to them first – like inviting them to come to worship with you! Could you do that? Would you? If not, why not? That, dear ones, is something to ponder more deeply. The most effective way to grow a church is through personal invitation from her members!

I would also suggest that we look for ourselves in Peter and his step by step approach to this particular situation. As we already discussed, he receives a criticism, a rather harsh one, and he doesn't get upset or angry. He calmly answers the question, step by step. He outlines how he moved from Point A to Point B to Point C and back again in this journey he knew God was inviting him to take. I'd like us to note that not only is this an effective way of engaging in conversation with folks who are questioning us, but also a faithful way of making our way through life each day. One step at a time. This is very important for our overall health and wellbeing, spiritually, physically and mentally, especially in these days when so much about our lives is in flux through no fault of our own. Everything from people to institutions are disappointing us creating uncertainty at every turn at times creating anxiety that feels overwhelming. Yet we still need to live our lives. And we need to live them with hope that God is somehow in the middle of all this mess, that Jesus still loves us and has not forgotten us. Nor has Jesus morphed into the "Rambo" character some Christian Nationalists espouse. Jesus is still Jesus, loving and kind, urging us always to care for the least of these. Don't get me wrong, dear ones, none of this is easy to negotiate nor should it be. There is no discernable step by step process that will extricate our country from this mess. At least not one that is visible to us at this moment. But, dear ones, let me urge you to trust that it is there and in

the process of unfolding each day. Just as my life and your life have unfolded up to this point – step by step, one day at a time. I’ve told you my story of a childhood dream now come to life in unexpected ways. Dear ones, I’m guessing if you take the time to do so, you will be able to discern God’s actions in your life too. I urge you to take the time to ponder your own lives in the same way, looking for God in all the moments of your life.

As you do, please remember that our journey into God’s future continues always, step by step, with God guiding us forward, Jesus walking beside us and the Holy Spirit spurring us to action as we are able. Dear ones, we got this. Step by step. One day, one moment at a time. We got this, because God has got us. Always. Amen.