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Sermon 29 May 2022

Title: The Rising Church Sermon 6: New Lenses

(Acts 11:1-18)

- Good morning church family, and welcome to the final LargsNaz Online service. Now that doesn't mean you won't be able to join us on YouTube anymore, but it does mean that starting next week, what you'll see in these videos will be a recording of our live, in-person service—and that will be uploaded before the end of the day on Sunday. And next week we'll be beginning our summer tradition—the Psalm Beach series—and so I hope you're looking forward to that.
- I also want to remind you that we'll be reviewing this sermon series in tonight's Second Helping Bible study, at the church at 6pm and we certainly hope you can join us.
- This is not just the last LargsNaz Online service, but it's also the last of 6 sermons looking at the book of Acts and asking, among other things, What can the church in the so-called Post-Christian age learn from the church in the pre-Christian age?
- This sermon series has been called The Rising Church, and

- we've seen how at the beginning of the Book of Acts, Jesus rises up into heaven,
- we saw how the apostles are filled with the Spirit and Pentecost and how Peter rises up to speak to the crowd of pilgrims in Jerusalem
- we've seen how the church itself begins to rise up, with thousands coming to repentance and being baptized and receiving the infilling of the Holy Spirit
- We've seen how Peter and John, through the power of Jesus' name, tell a lame beggar, forced to remain outside the temple gates, to RISE UP and be made clean—and to accompany them into the temple—we saw how people were amazed and listen to Peter's preaching, and thousands more are added to the church—but not everyone was happy about that
- Last Sunday we saw how Peter and John and the lame beggar who got healed were seized and thrown in jail and appeared before the temple authorities, and really before the whole power structure of Jewish life in Jerusalem—and we saw how they rise to the occasion and speak with *parrhesia*, that boldness that speaks truth to power, that believes in the truth it speaks, speaks the whole truth, hiding nothing, for the sake of others, and does so in the face of risk—in this case under the risk of death from those who threaten them and say they need to stop using the name of Jesus when they teach and when they perform miracles
- And when Peter and John tell the growing church what had happened, the whole gathered church prays and as they pray, the place where they are

shakes, they are all filled with the holy Spirit and they speak the word of God with Parrhesia just like Peter had before the council

- All that was in Chapter Four of Acts, but today as we end this series we're going to skip WAY ahead to Chapter 11, and our sermon today is called "New Lenses," because I want to begin it by telling you a story.
- I bought my first pair of sunglasses when I was about 15.
- Or at least the first pair that I paid for with my own money.
- And they were not, as the ZZ Top song goes, cheap sunglasses—they were RayBan Wayfarers—like the Blues Brothers wore—
- it was hard to get cooler than Jake and Elwood Blues in 1981
- But I had decided that unlike my friends who bought lots of pairs of cheap sunglasses, and lost them, and had to replace them often, I'd spend a little more on the really well-made ones and keep them longer—and that's worked for me
- And for along time—decades-- I'd replace my sunglasses about every 5 years
- And I needed to—because after 5 years the lenses would be pretty scratched up, because I'd wear my sunglasses a lot—driving, at the beach, working outside—pretty much all the time
- The last pair of non-prescription sunglasses I purchased were a pair of RayBan "Predator" sunglasses
- I bought them in April of 2015
- And I really liked them—and when I'd had them almost 5 years, we were living in Glasgow, and I made the mistake of putting my glasses in the pocket

- of my backpack, which I then dropped it onto the pavement—I didn't think anything about it at the time but the next morning when I took them out of the pocket, the right lens was shattered—not just cracked—it was shattered
- Well, I thought—it's about time for a new pair of glasses
 - And I really liked those glasses, too
 - But I figured I'd have to replace them
 - But it didn't take me long to realize that in the time that had passed since I'd bought those glasses at Costco in Augusta, Georgia in 2015, the price had increased considerably—and to replace a pair of Polarized RayBan Predators was going to cost me almost 200 pounds—which was a lot more than I had paid for them in the first place—a LOT more
 - So I went without sunglasses for a while, and I considered more affordable options
 - But my broken-lensed sunglasses sat on my desk beside my computer and tormented me—I wanted THOSE sunglasses—I didn't want a different pair
 - And one day Tasha said "why don't you just replace the lenses?"
 - I thought what? Was this a possibility? Why had I never thought of this before? I could still be wearing that first pair of Wayfarers I had bought when I was 15 if this were a thing I could do—surely this can't be a thing
 - I did a little research and sure enough, you can replace Ray-Ban lenses
 - I was still a little suspect, and more than a little regretful that if this were possible that I hadn't been doing it for the past almost 40 years—but better late than never—and I found a place I could order replacement lenses from—

they had to come from Australia—but they came with free shipping—and only set me back about 35 pounds—considerably more affordable than 200 pounds—and I got to keep my frames

- Sure enough, they arrived, I popped the old lenses out, and popped the new lenses in
- I didn't need to replace everything—**just the lenses—and I could see clearly—perfectly.** All I needed was new lenses.
- Today's scripture is from the ELEVENTH chapter of Acts, and as you read Chapter 11, if you've read chapter 10 before it, you realize that Luke is repeating himself—that what happens in chapter 10 is recounted, step by step, by Peter in Chapter 11
- Now we have seen the care that Luke takes in his writing, and so it's safe to assume that Luke is not just being repetitive here, he's not just being redundant and saying the same thing over and over again (like I just did)
- No, here is a story so nice Luke tells it twice, and I think he does so because it's important
- In Chapter 11, in verses 1 through 3 we find that some folks in the young Christian church, those who were in Judea, are annoyed with Peter—kind of like the council and the Temple authorities were last week
- And we see that Peter goes UP—UP to Jerusalem—there's Luke's use of direction again
- And when he gets up to Jerusalem, the “circumcised believers” criticize Peter and ask him why he went down to uncircumcised men and ate with them

- Now that seems like an awful personal detail, doesn't it? I mean, you wouldn't use that particular characteristic to describe a specific person or group of people in most polite circumstances—you might mention the colour of their hair or where they're from or how tall they are, but you wouldn't mention, you know—that. But Luke does, and he doesn't give us this detail just for the sake of being pedantic, but he does this because you can read the word "circumcised" as meaning those who followed Jewish law, and uncircumcised as referring to those who don't—you can read those two terms as Jewish and non-Jewish, as clean and unclean—and if you're a good Jew, you don't eat with the unclean—so these circumcised folks have a problem with Peter
- Now to better understand what's going on here in chapters 10 and 11, it's helpful to consider two things that Luke has been unfolding throughout the book of Acts
- The first is what it means to be the people of Israel, the chosen people of God, and how Jesus and his followers fit into the history of the Hebrew people
- And we have seen that there is a difference of opinion on that subject
- There is no doubt that the Apostles see Jesus as the Messiah of the Hebrew people—this is why before the ascension, they ask if he's going to restore the nation of Israel to greatness—and Jesus replies: you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

- After Pentecost, Peter speaks to the devout Jews from all over the earth who have made the pilgrimage, saying “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you,
 - ²² “You that are Israelites,^[a] listen to what I have to say:
 - ²⁹ “Fellow Israelites,^[d]
 - let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah,^[h] this Jesus whom you crucified.”
- After the healing of the beggar, Peter addresses the people by saying “You Israelites, The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant^[c] Jesus,
- When Peter and John appear before the authorities in Chapter 4, Peter says: ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth,
- Before the stoning of **Stephen**, the first Christian martyr, in Chapter 7, Stephen speaks all about Moses and Abraham and Jacob, and Solomon (if you’ve never read it, you should because it’s an amazing discourse)
- **But the point is that throughout the beginning of Acts, Jesus and his followers are understood within the context of Hebrew tradition—as the fulfillment of the prophecies about the coming of the Messiah and the Kingdom of God**
- But on the other hand, there are the Authorities—the high priests and rulers and the elite of Jerusalem’s religious and political structures, those who are in cahoots with the Roman Empire—the ones who arrest Peter and John,

who say that Jesus is not the Messiah, that resurrection isn't real, who have the Apostles and followers of Jesus persecuted and imprisoned and flogged, who execute Stephen by stoning after saying THIS about him (now listen to this): "This man never stops saying things against **this holy place and the law; ¹⁴for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth¹⁴ will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us."**

- **There it is, isn't it? Here we see their principal motivation –It's fear-- the fear of change, fear of losing authority, fear of losing their identity—and that's not just a fear that the religious authorities have, it's a fear, as we'll see, that some in the early Christian church have as well**
- So the Apostles have one view, the Authorities have another, but there are also the people, and we're told that the people hear the words and see the deeds of the Apostles, and by the thousands believe, repent, and are baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit
- And that's the second thing that Luke unfolds in the Book of Acts—in addition to the general repentance, conversions, and baptisms of "the people" by the thousands, he also tells us about the conversions of individual people—and those **individual conversions** tell us a lot about what the Kingdom of God and the gospel of Jesus is all about—and each one of them demonstrates the prophetic promise that God is pouring out his Spirit upon all flesh to the ends of the Earth—but up until Chapter 10, that movement is contained within the Hebrew tradition—and each of those conversions calls into question the exclusivity of the religious authorities—these conversions

critique assumptions about insiders and outsiders—about who's clean and who's unclean—within the confines of the Jewish community

- Let me give you just three examples—3 times the understanding of who's inside and who's outside is challenged
- First, the lame beggar we met in Chapter 3, we talked about he was from birth excluded from the Temple Community, unclean, forsaken, but he is healed and made clean and welcomed into the temple—but this outsider who had been restricted to come no closer than the gate demonstrated the power of the Spirit to shake up the social, political and religious system—and the insiders, as we saw, the authorities, didn't like it one bit
- Secondly, when Stephen is martyred in Chapter 7 we're told by Luke that Saul is watching and approving the stoning. Then we're told that this guy, Saul, is ravaging the Christian church in Jerusalem, seizing people and throwing them in prison, breathing threats AND MURDER against the followers of Jesus, and so the church is scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, and only the apostles remain in Jerusalem. Saul even goes so far as to ask the high priest for permission to search the synagogues in Damascus for followers of Jesus, so he can tie them up and bring them back to Jerusalem. So for the authorities, Saul was a real INSIDER—he was a zealot against those outsiders in the Christian church—but in the eyes of the disciples—he's a bad guy—he's a terrorist and murderer—but what happens? In the story that Luke tells us, we see that even someone like Saul can be transformed by the power of Jesus—even though when he tries to join

the disciples they don't trust him—but he rises to become the greatest missionary the church has ever known.

- Thirdly, third example of a conversion that calls into question the traditional understanding of who's an insider and who's outsider within the Hebrew way of looking at things---Now, when the church is scattered, we're told in Chapter 8 that Philip is led by the Spirit out into the wilderness, where he sees an Ethiopian eunuch riding in his chariot, reading from the writings of Isaiah. Now there are lots of ambiguities in this story—the eunuch is a slave, but he is a powerful slave, we're told he was worshipping in Jerusalem, but we're not told whether he was a convert to Judaism or not—but what we do know is that he's reading from the Hebrew scriptures, the writings of the prophet Isaiah, and Philip explains to him that he's reading about Jesus, to which the eunuch responds, "Hey there's some water, baptize me." Now what's noteworthy about that story is that eunuchs were not allowed into the temple either—but Isaiah prophesies about the coming Kingdom of God, when Eunuchs and strangers WOULD be welcome in the temple, and unlike the beggar at the gate, the Eunuch is not **physically** changed from an outsider to an insider—he remains a eunuch and a stranger from a faraway land—but is STILL made holy, sanctified, baptized and made clean through his faith in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus
- So the point is that in the Book of Acts, up until Chapter 10, Jesus is understood as the Jewish Messiah, and Christianity as a sect, or a tradition within, the fulfillment of the Jewish tradition—the gospel of Jesus is

understood as a message of repentance and forgiveness and hope **for the Jewish people**—and the individual conversions that happen up until Chapter 10 are about expanding the idea of who's inside and who's outside, **but the outsiders are at most on the borders, on the fringes of Jewish tradition—they are not completely outside of it**

- But in chapter 10, something new happens—and that's what the circumcised apostles in Jerusalem have heard about—they've heard that the uncircumcised Gentiles have accepted the Word of God, and they're not happy about it. So what does Peter do? In verses 4 through 6 we see that
- Peter begins to explain, step by step—now later on Paul—the Apostle Paul—he'll have to deal with a similar problem, and he doesn't follow Peter's methodical and reasonable example--Paul will resort to name-calling and suggesting that his critics do some harm to themselves—that's because Paul is a hothead—and here is a lesson in leadership from Peter—when you have to address an emotional subject, approach it step by step and don't lose your cool.
- And so Peter responds by saying that he was in Joppa (now that's not the Edinburgh suburb) and Peter says that while he was waiting for someone to fix him some lunch, he was praying—maybe he was praying that they'd hurry up with his food because he was hungry---but he was probably reciting a traditional prayer like the Shema—shema O Israel the Lord is God, the Lord is One—that kind of prayer would have often been prayed with the rhythm of a person's breathing, like a mantra is said in meditation—and Peter does say

he was in a trance—now some people might not like that—do you know I’ve heard some Christians talk about meditation and contemplative prayer like it was some kind of satanic ritual? I’ve heard folks say that you better not meditate or let yourself get too deep in prayer because you might get possessed by a demon—you might fall victim to an unclean spirit—to them I would point to Peter’s example and say that if you’re filled with the Holy Spirit, you’re full up and there’s not gonna be any room for any other spirits to take up residence, so there is no need for that kind of fearful attitude—anyway, that was a tangent, but Peter has this vision

- and all sorts of unclean animals—those Jews are forbidden to eat—were lowered down in front of him, and then, verse 7, he says,
 - I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’
- Now think about this—Peter recognizes the voice of the Lord, understands the command, and flatly says, “No way, not doing it—I don’t eat unclean things”
- And then he gets a response
 - But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.
- Now did you catch that? Three times. Three times the voice of the Lord says “Get up—rise up, come to the table, it’s dinnertime” and three times Peter

refuses—and three times the voice of the Lord says “what God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

- You know sometimes God has to repeat himself to get through to us—we don’t always understand what the Lord is saying to us right off the bat. That’s certainly the case with Peter—now remember that Peter is living within the Jewish tradition—he has not abandoned it whatsoever—in fact, he understands that Jesus is the fulfillment of Hebrew tradition, and so we’re told that even after this vision—if you look back in chapter 10, Peter continues to think about what in the world it could have meant
- But what it meant is explained in the next verses—verse 11 tells us that
- At that very moment three men, who were sent from Caesarea, arrived at the house. The Spirit tells Peter to go with these men and not to make a distinction between them and us. Now six others go with Peter, and they go into this man’s house and the man who lives there says he’s seen an angel IN his house—not ON it or above it or outside it, but IN it—and the angel says ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’
- Now if we look back at chapter 10, we see where these men came from and who “the man” Peter is talking about is—it’s Cornelius, and he’s an Italian centurion who lives in Caesarea and he is described as a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God, --an upright and God-fearing man, who is well

spoken of by the whole Jewish nation—but he is, despite all this, a Gentile, uncircumcised and unclean

- And Cornelius was directed by an angel who appeared to him to send for Peter to come to his house
- Now notice something here—what is about to happen to Cornelius does not begin when Peter arrives, it does not begin when Peter has his vision—it is already in progress—God is already at work in Cornelius’ life—and God is already preparing the way for him and his entire household to be saved—and do you know the same is true for us? When we witness to people, when we proclaim the gospel, we do not do so alone, and we do not enter any places where or meet any people in whom God isn’t already at work—in the Church of the Nazarene we believe in prevenient grace—that grace that is at work in the lives of people even while they’re unsaved, drawing them toward salvation—we see this at work in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, who reads without understanding—but he reads, and he yearns for understanding—Luke reminds us here that God prepares the way in the hearts and minds of those we’re called to share the good news with
- So Peter, we’re told in Chapter 10, goes to Cornelius’ house and tells those who are there:
 - You know it’s unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection.

- And there it is—**Peter then understands that vision that he had**—he says “God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean, so I entered this house without fear of being defiled”
- And Peter goes on to report to the apostles in Jerusalem, in verse 15, he says
 - As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon **them** just as it had upon **us** at the beginning. And that was when I remembered the words of Jesus, when he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ And Peter reaches this eye-opening conclusion: he says “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?”
- Peter says the Holy Spirit fell on them **just as it had upon us at Pentecost**—God gave these Gentiles, these folks we call unclean, the gift of the Spirit—now do you remember what Peter said immediately after Pentecost? He quoted the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
- **But it isn’t until now that Peter begins to realize what ALL FLESH means**—it actually means ALL FLESH—despite Peter’s hesitation, despite Peter’s prejudices about who’s clean or unclean, who deserves salvation or doesn’t—Peter realizes: who was I that I could hinder God?
- And what about Peter’s critics? Verse 18 tells us that When they heard what Peter told them, they were silenced. Did they get mad? Did they get offended?

Did they raise objections? No, Luke tells us that they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the **repentance** that leads to life.”

- And now we have a better idea of why Luke tells this story twice—because it emphasizes the reality that no one, not a lame beggar outside the temple gate, not a zealous terrorist and murderer, not an Ethiopian eunuch, not even the uncircumcised Gentiles, no one is an outsider in the Kingdom of God, but the repentance that leads to life is available for all.
- And that means all, even those we might be prone to think of as outside the reach of the gospel, those we might say are beyond hope—those we might tend to exclude from our witness—even the most vile, unloveable, unclean, disgusting person—can you think of someone like that? Imagine sitting at a table with them? I’m pretty sure that after what happened this week in Uvalde Texas, we could all think of an 18-year old who fits that description—but ALL FLESH includes even them--Even them, They are loved by God and called to repentance and salvation through the power of the Spirit and the grace of God, called to healing and wholeness through the blood and resurrection of Jesus. You cannot think of a person so far gone that God’s grace doesn’t call them to repentance and forgiveness. That’s amazing grace—that saves even a wretch like me.
- Now what has happened here in these verses from the 11th Chapter of Acts?
- When he went to the Gentiles, did Peter replace the Gospel with something different—did he change it in some way? No. Did he replace the traditions of

his Hebrew heritage—throwing them out as obsolete? No. Did he tell the circumcised believers that it was wrong for them to follow Jewish law? No.

- He had a vision that changed the way he saw things. He changed his view of who's clean and unclean and replaced it with the way God sees them.
- **You might say Peter didn't change everything—he only replaced his lenses.**
- And the new lenses he looks through **open his eyes to the fact that his perspective was too narrow, too small, too restricted**
- God was doing a much bigger thing than he or the circumcised believers had thought—their vision was limited—**something much bigger was going on.**
- And I wonder today how often our own perspectives are too limited, too small, too restricted—and I pray that God will open our eyes to the bigger picture—the larger work that He has in mind—my prayer for us today is that when we need it, God will replace our lenses.