

**Fifth Sunday of Easter**  
**May 19, 2019**  
**Northfield, MA**

**Scripture:** Acts 11:1-18

Here's a factoid. The digital camera was invented in 1975 and patented in 1978 by Kodak. The camera, which is on display at the Smithsonian, took a 100 x 100 pixel image. It took 23 seconds to record onto a cassette tape and another 30 seconds to view it on a television. Kodak made billions of dollars on the patent until it expired in 2007.

Its inventor, Steven Sasson, demonstrated it to executives across Kodak's many divisions and even suggested that the image could be sent via telephone line. He got a tepid reception. The image wasn't that sharp, and they didn't believe people would want to see their pictures on a television. Furthermore, it would end their lucrative film business. Bear in mind that Kodak not only sold the film, it made the cameras to capture the image and the chemicals to develop and print the images.

Three years after the patent expired, Kodak filed for bankruptcy.

Though we don't see the familiar yellow box, Kodak is still around. Rather than seeing itself as a chemical company, it is an image company. It provides imaging solutions for other companies and partners. It also developed a business incubator park in Rochester which houses 68 companies with 16 million square feet for manufacturing, distribution, labs, and offices.

Another factoid. Remember Blockbuster Video? They seemed to be everywhere. I remember spending lots of Saturday evenings looking for a movie on VHS to rent. Then, Netflix came.

Netflix had no brick and mortar store. It allowed subscribers to choose films from the web and then would send them through the mail. There were no late fees. That model, though, was only a starting point. Its true vision entailed streaming films to viewers over the internet and enabling them to watch a movie over any viewing device.

Today, no more Saturday nights for me at the video store. DISH television bought Blockbuster and only one brick and mortar Blockbuster store remains. It's in Bend, Oregon.

Kodak and Blockbuster missed what hit them. They were wedded to their business model. Kodak relied upon selling film and chemicals and photographic supplies to show pictures on paper or as slides. Really, who would look at pictures on their telephone?

Blockbuster set up stores to bring movies to neighborhoods and relied upon revenue from late fees. Except, people have better things to do than return Saturday night's movie to the store on Sunday.

These companies had to make a paradigm shift to remain viable. Survival meant letting go of some deeply cherished practices. It required rethinking their basic assumptions. It necessitated recognizing a massive change coming upon them and then stepping out in faith to embrace something new and different.

That's what Peter did. When he witnessed the Holy Spirit descend upon Cornelius and his family, he saw the Jesus movement in a completely different way.

Jesus did not intend to found a new religion. His ministry sought to reform the practices of the religious authorities. He questioned the way they interpreted Jewish law. He pressed to make Judaism consistent with his understanding of the law. His teachings ran contrary to the

ways of the Roman Empire, essentially overturning the assumptions of the Empire's organizing principles.

All of Jesus' disciples were Jewish. When he ascended forty days after the resurrection, the movement he began became their responsibility. They believed that the movement was a Jewish reformation. Though Philip readily baptized the Ethiopian eunuch earlier in Acts, the baptism of Cornelius' family was a revelation to Peter. The same Holy Spirit that touched the Jews on that Pentecost morning touched Cornelius and his family.

Advocating for Gentiles to be baptized and become part of the movement was a paradigm shift. Faithful to the ways of Jesus would not be limited to Jews. Consider for a moment the implications of this. One that comes to my mind immediately is 1 Corinthians 8 when Paul instructed the church to set aside disagreements over meat sacrificed to idols. Opening the movement to Gentiles fundamentally changed it. Peter successfully persuaded them.

Later in this chapter Luke noted that word about Jesus had spread among the Gentiles. Describing the next twelve months, Luke wrote, "And a great many people were brought to the Lord." (11:24b)

The paradigm shift changed the movement. Luke wrote, "So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians.'" (11:26b) This was the break. The movement identified itself separate from Judaism. Of course, this decision was stepping out in faith because no one could know what was to come. They trusted God and Jesus' teachings to guide them into their unknown future.

When we look at the health of the church today, we need a paradigm shift. You are not the only church that has an aging population, that has a declining membership, that faces financial challenges. This situation is not confined to the United Church of Christ. It's across denominations and the theological spectrum. Even evangelically conservative congregations face the same situation. Furthermore, when we really dig down into the Christian landscape today, even our seminaries are struggling.

Let's not, though, believe that this is the end of the Church. The Church as in God's church will never die because the Holy Spirit is alive and moving. However, though the Church will always be, local churches come and go. Note that all the churches founded by Paul are gone. If there are historic churches which should be around, they would be Paul's.

Still, I believe there is life yet to come for many of our local churches, even those that are struggling. Even those whose congregations are small. Even those whose congregations are aging. Even those who face financial insecurity.

I'm here to work with you for a short term interim period to guide your discernment. We know we cannot keep doing what we've been doing for decades, but what do we do? The quick from my perspective is a church needs to identify and claim an identity rooted in its vision of the body of Christ in the world today. In short: what makes this church unique? as God's instruments of grace, how are we called to serve? what values truly matter to us in order to serve and what do we have or do that impedes our service?

We will work together over these months. We have already scheduled community discernment sessions, one session a month, through the summer. We will read together and

discuss how to be the church in a postmodern world. We will reconnect to our roots with a Bible study on the first half of Acts to find lessons for the future.

Friends, this interim time is a time to ask questions. Ask questions of me. Ask questions of yourselves. Let the Holy Spirit lead us together to see ourselves in a new light. Let us learn a new song to proclaim the gospel to a world that desperately needs to hear hope born anew. And let us step out in faith.