

**A Wider Vision, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. x5070506**  
**Acts 11:1-18 and John 13:31-35**  
**Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 6 May, 2007**

In two weeks, the seniors of Elon University class of 2007 will graduate. Some will head directly into their careers. Jonathan Fiedler will take up work at a physical therapy clinic in Roanoke to test out his interests. Others will head to graduate school. Jonathan Chapman will enter Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta. Students will scatter to different cities and states. Francis Amadehe and his wife Cecelia will head back to Ghana.

Elon University will never be the same again. The student body of 2006-2007 will never again gather together. The town of Elon will be relatively quiet through the summer. Then, in August, there will be an influx of a new student body. You who have been involved with the University over the years are aware of the cycles of fluctuations of student bodies over the years.

By the same token, Elon Community Church will never be the same. The two Jonathans, Stephanie, Jeremy, and Brandon will not be among us after May 20. These students have changed this church through their involvement in our lives. They have widened our vision.

This church has changed their lives too. You each have had an effect on them. You have widened their vision also. You, your love and your acceptance, have led one of them to accept a call to ministry and another to begin considering that call.

The church changes in other ways also. We all age, and some of us cannot perform the same functions as well as we used to. New members come into the congregation with new interests and new energies. Bill Ellis, former member of the choir, has only a few more hours or days to be with us. Luke Coker has joined our fellowship as an infant with all the hope and expectation that new life brings.

Some of our newer members have brought new fellowship activities; others, a sense of conscience about environment or social justice; some, new care for shut-ins; and others, excellent painting skills! All of them have widened our vision.

The church is like an endless procession, following the lead of Jesus Christ. One joins the procession here wearing colorful garb, perhaps carrying the banner of a cause. Another leaves the procession there, because she has tired feet. She sits and rests, waiting to rejoin the procession later on. There is singing and skipping, hand holding and supporting along the way, but the procession is always changing, ever moving onward at the call of Jesus who widens our vision. The church never stays the same. This congregation is not the same as the one that sat here last Sunday. Each Sunday, this congregation is different. It is changing.

In our reading from the book of Acts, we heard of a change in direction early in the church's procession. Peter had a widening vision: a voice told Peter to kill and eat food that he had been taught was unclean. The voice said, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."<sup>1</sup> In other words, God has made everything, and God has made everything clean. There is no unclean!

Now, if this vision occurred in isolation, all it would mean is that worshipers of God can eat anything they want. It would simply mean the end of the dietary laws. But it didn't occur in isolation. Just as his vision ended, three men approached Peter. They asked him to accompany them to Caesarea, to the house of a man named Cornelius, a commander in the Roman army, a Gentile, and a representative of oppression—the enemy. Peter was able to put two and two

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<sup>1</sup>Acts 11:9

together, and realized that his vision about all of God's creation being clean, meant that he could associate with Gentiles, and that even the enemy was worthy of God's healing touch.

In our scripture this morning from Acts, Peter is defending himself, telling the old forces of conservatism why he was associating with the Gentiles. He was widening their vision, and it stirred up no small amount of controversy.

Consider what this story means to us today. Those who would draw lines around the Christian faith as to who is in and who is out, are like the circumcision party. We cannot limit the faith to those who are acceptable to us. We cannot limit God's grace. We cannot define salvation. All people are created by God, and therefore clean. They're okay to associate with, and okay to share the good news of Christ with.

The good news for you specifically is, you are created by God. Therefore, you are clean. You do not have to be weighed down by guilt and sin. In Christ, you are a new creation.

We cannot define the Christian faith by legalisms. The word of God is not a dead, carved in stone, once and for all literalism. The word of God is dynamic and moving, and way ahead of our definitions and exclusivity. You might say, "God is Still Speaking!"

This is a scripture of inclusiveness. What has God created that is not clean? Peter's vision means everything is clean. That includes the poor, the homeless, the immigrants and aliens, legal and illegal. That includes you and me!

Early in my ministry, I heard the phrase, "God don't make no junk!" I was counseling a young woman who thought very poorly of herself. I gave her the homework assignment of making me a wall plaque out of felt with that phrase on it. She made two. She gave me one and kept the other for herself. By memorizing that simple phrase, she began to heal and to grow. God don't make no junk!

These students who have shared our fellowship these last four years have widened our vision. As they move on, I am reminded of Jesus' words, "Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'"<sup>2</sup> We cannot go where these students are going— physically. But, we will go with them in a sense. They will take our love and care with them. We will remain fixed in their memory and they in ours. We hope to keep in contact with them.

Their presence with us has embodied Jesus' command in the next verse:

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."<sup>3</sup>

The process of people's coming into the life of this church and of people's leaving the life of this church challenges us to love. It is so important to be welcoming to others, to develop deep and loving relationships as quickly as possible— for they will not be with us long, and then to be able to say "Farewell and God speed!" when it is time to part. We will remember that while we were together, we felt God's love among us. That love is new every day, and yet it is a changeless and eternal love. We celebrate that wider vision of love as we come to the communion table.

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<sup>2</sup>John 13: 33

<sup>3</sup>John 13:34-35