

“The Gospel in a Multicultural World”

Acts 10: 1-36

We continue in the Book of Acts and we come upon a fascinating story about Peter and Cornelius. And maybe it is just the preacher geek in me, but every time I read this story, I think, “Exactly! This is the story that we as the Church should be really telling every time we proclaim the Kingdom of God.”

I don’t know. Maybe it is because this story is so much like the Jonah story which I know always reminds me that God does have a sense of humor. Maybe I really enjoy this story because now as Christians, we can’t say “Oh, things like that only happened in the Old Testament and since we are a New Testament movement, we don’t have to pay any attention to only in the OT.” Or maybe I really like this story because so often I have found myself being reminded that just when I think I have things figured out when it comes to God and my calling as a disciple, God is constantly reminding me that that is not true, only to discover that God is keeping me on my toes.

The preacher geek in me just loves this story for so many reasons but maybe the reason I love this story the most is because I know how smart Luke is for adding this story into the Book of Acts. In just this simple act, he takes away all of our excuses and holds up a big mirror to our faces and asks us, “Where do you see

yourself in this story?” Something we don’t often like to do as modern day disciples.

And he does it so brilliantly! Luke uses the lovable apostle Peter as the main character of this story. Peter, someone we can relate to, someone about whom we have all thought “Been there, Done that, someone who is well-respected, who is a leader of the church, someone who after a rocky start, finally finds his footing and allows God to use him in amazing ways, just like God has done in all our lives.

Now before we go any further, I want to refresh our memory about the Jonah story because its themes are reflected so much in this story about Peter. As we may remember, God tells Jonah to go and preach to that group in Nineveh, you know those outsiders but Jonah doesn’t think Nineveh is worthy of such good news, and so he decides to run in the opposite direction. Only to soon find himself in the belly of a great big fish. And after rethinking a few things, Jonah decides that anything has got to be better than sitting in a stinky fish so he agrees to preach God’s message to those people, those outsiders. And then the best part of the story is that even when Jonah decides to preach the message and the people repent, Jonah gets mad because how dare God show mercy to those people. Jonah gets mad because God shows grace to the supposed outsiders just like God did for Jonah in the belly of the great fish. And that is what really sets Jonah off because that was not what Jonah signed up for when he agreed to associate with those

people. This was not what Jonah expected when he agreed to follow God. That was not the ways things like grace or mercy were supposed to work if you asked Jonah. God is supposed to only show grace and mercy to the insiders, to the people that deserve it, to people, well, like Jonah. But how soon we forget that like Jonah, we were not so deserving if maybe we asked someone else.

But the story doesn't end there. Jonah learns the hard way once again, that the thing about God is that God doesn't seem to care about our opinions about who is worthy or not, who is deserving of grace or not, or who is on the outside and who is on the inside. God doesn't seem to hold to the same idea that we as the church are in charge and God is simply allowed to be a part of our lives. God doesn't seem to seek our approval before God acts to bring healing or reconciliation to God's creation. It is almost as if we are a part of the whole, not the whole. God is God and we are not! The Jonah story reminds us that our God is loving, slow to anger and is steadfast, just like our story reminds of again today.

This is the same lesson that Peter and we as modern day disciples learn again today and every day when we find ourselves being asked to try something new for the sake of the Gospel message, when we find ourselves being pushed out of our comfort zones, when we find ourselves being in every time we think we've got our calling and our mission as the church figured out, thank you very much,

only to discover that we have only just started the journey and we still have a ways to go.

When we hear this story, what we discover is that we are also like the lovable main character, Peter, people who need to be constantly reminded that God is God and we are not. In our text today, Peter is a well respected preacher. He is no longer a bumbling disciple who speaks before he acts. He is out there preaching the message to the people he thinks are worthy and deserving of the good news, only to discover that God is keeping him on his toes, as the journey continues and he sees beyond his supposed mission to the Kingdom of God in his midst.

So here is what, we know so far: Peter is out there stirring hearts and saving souls. He is an insider who just knows exactly what his mission is and that mission is to reconnect the House of Israel with the new things that God has done through Jesus Christ and continues to do through the gift of the Holy Spirit. He is so sure that he is only supposed to be speaking to the people who think like him and act like him that he doesn't stray too far away from Jerusalem. Sure, he does some day trips to spread the Gospel, but he always come back to Jerusalem, home base. That is until one afternoon.

Peter has this unusual vision that pushes the boundaries of his mission and forces him to rethink about his perceived notions and thoughts about the Kingdom of God. He sees this blanket coming down with food that according to the rules is

unclean, and therefore not acceptable. But wouldn't you know it, God changes things up and tells Peter to eat this food, something that was definitely out of Peter's comfort zone. And wouldn't you know, Peter starts to tell God that God is all wrong, only to find himself being told, "Just who do you think you are?" If God makes it clean and tells you it is clean, than what makes Peter think he has the right to question or do things differently!"

Once again, the beauty of this story is that Peter discovers the thing about God is that just when we think we know the rules, God has a funny way of changing things up on us without even talking to us first. God has a funny way of not asking our opinions of who we think should be or not be embraced as a child of God. God has a funny way of reminding us that sometimes it is us as the supposed insiders who have it all wrong and that in reality, we are the ones on the outside who are in need of transformation, just like Peter did when he followed God's direction, had a real conversation with Cornelius, a supposed outsider, and actually got to know the person, not just the stereotypes or assumptions. Peter realized that the Israelites were not just the only ones that could experience the Kingdom of God here on earth. That God was working in ways beyond Peter's limited understanding, beyond the supposed boundaries of grace. God was working I ways and speaking to people in new and amazing ways , ways that didn't need the apostles' approval or permission. And that is the good news for us this morning

and our moment of transformation. As part of the Body of Christ here on earth, we must remember that God is God and we are not, and sometimes we are called to remove our self-made blinders and realize that the mission field is not always about us saving others. The mission field very well could be found in our own congregations, in our own sanctuaries, and in our lives. We never stop being transformed by the good news. Transformation is a once in a lifetime experience that takes our whole lives to complete. We never stop growing in faith. We don't have all the answers and the best part of it all is that God constantly keeps us on our toes!

as the church and as modern day disciples, we need to realize that the Kingdom of God is not about our rules and regulations, about our practices and our policies. It is an invitation to be the best church for God we can be, to be the best disciples that we can be, to be the best child of God we can be through loving action and word, and embrace the understanding that God will do the rest. Our text today challenges us to see beyond the rules that we have set up for years about who is in and who is not welcomed into to the Kingdom of God that is in our midst, and get down to our real calling which is to bring healing and reconciliation, bring hope and grace, bring love and peace to all of God's creation, not just a chosen few.

Our text reminds us that just when we think our mission can be boiled down to budgets and programs, God has a funny way of changing the conversation and reminding us that everything the church does, everything we do as modern day disciples should be about proclaiming the Kingdom God, should be about building the bridges so Jesus can walk across them. Our very calling as modern day disciples should be about sharing the Good news that thankfully, God loves us, no matter what, even when we are at our most unlovable moment.

The thing we have to remember is that the good news of the Gospel is too good to be confined to just one group. The good news of the Gospel is just too life-giving to be limited to a chosen few. The good news of the Gospel is just too wonderful to be given and shared with those that think and act like us. The good news of the Gospel is for all of God's children.

And every time we think differently, God reminds us that God is God and we are not.

Maybe that's why I love this story so much. It humbles me as a believer and reminds me that I don't have all the answers. It reminds me that at some point in my life, I was lost and then found by God. It reminds me that at some point in my life, someone showed me a little grace and welcomed me into the Kingdom of God.

Maybe I really love this story because it reminds me always that God love us, no matter what, no matter our race, our creed, our color , our nationality, our life style choices. We are all precious in God's sight.

May we always remember that just when we think we've got it all figured out, God has a way of changing the conversation and keeping us on our toes. Amen.