



The Peace Between

Sermon

Sermon Text: Acts 10:1-48

Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right."

Acts 10:34-35 (The Holy Bible, New International Version® NIV, by Biblica Inc.)

The Great Commission in Matthew 28 is the bedrock of the Christian understanding of Call. It is our mission statement, our directive, our job description. Christ-followers are called to go, to make disciples of all nations, to baptize in the name of the Holy Spirit, to teach and to preach. While the command is clear, the accomplishment of the task has been less precise, as our historical mission-narrative painfully describes. The Church has sometimes soared with excellence and at other times limped towards its fulfillment of this call to 'go'. We have wrestled with the tension of practical compassion and evangelism and we continue to do so. We have wrestled with the pain of martyrdom and the temptation to marry ourselves to the power of empire in order to wield influence and we continue to do so. If we are honest, ours is a sordid story of ups and downs. It is two thousand years after the death and resurrection of Christ and then the subsequent birth of the Church, and we still struggle to make sense of this seemingly deceptive task.

It should breathe hope into our world-weary souls that Acts 10 allows us to glimpse that very same wrestling in the mind and the heart of Peter. From the stupor of a roof-top vision to the doorway of a Gentile's home, we see Peter wrestling with the working out of this new and sometimes frustrating faith. His wide-eyed expression of experience as a factor in the transformative process of practical faith is beautifully expressed in verse 34: I now realize how true it is that God has no favorites. Peter bears us a reminder that the revelatory work of the Holy Spirit is often accomplished through the conduit of experience. Where tradition, reason, and the Torah defined Peter's understanding of the life, the death

and the resurrection of Christ, it was now this post-resurrection experience that pushed Peter into new territory.

God has no favorites

When Peter goes on to express his newly formed revelation, that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right, both our human nature and our reason demand that we find balance between God's justice and his mercy. There is something deep in our soul that longs to establish the how and the where of our belonging in the soil of a tribe. This rooting of our identity almost imperceptibly takes its cues from the definition of who is in and who is not. Our belonging is tied to our fortified walls, our strong borders, to our tribe as it is defined by skin or language or culture or stature or religion, to name a few. And once a person has been downgraded to the realm of 'the other', they can no longer be a favorite in the language of them and us. Peter was walking a tightrope of faith as he crossed the threshold into the home of Cornelius: An inclusive God that stretched across the ethnic and religious borders of Judaism was mind-shattering.

This Acts 10 narrative shouts the message of God's inclusivity from the margins of the story. These characters, their stories, they are more significant and more powerful than we might care to think, but then, the great irony is that the voices that we have relegated to the margins are often the ones we most need to hear.

Voices from the margins

There is Simon, the tanner, who opens his house on the sea to Peter. Simon, the tanner - a Jew, but just barely because that pulling of skin from flesh and sinew and bone was a bloody mess. And the animals that forfeited their skin were often considered unclean by Jewish law. Simon, as far out as one could be while still being 'in' - where his ethnicity defined him as chosen, his occupation relegated him to the literal edge.

The city of Joppa, where Simon's home rested amongst the poor, far from the city center where the salty sea air could carry the stench of rotting flesh far away. That most unhappy seaport from which the Jewish Jonah boarded a boat for Tarshish in the opposite direction of God's will. [Jonah 1:3] It is the winds of Joppa that carry the voice of Jonah, angry with God because he is merciful and willing to save 'the other' of Nineveh. And, oh how that story comes around again on the shores of the Galilee, when the Pharisees demand a sign. [Matthew 16:4] Jesus responded that the only sign they would have was the sign of Jonah. In other words, three days dead. In other words, a Cross. In other words, the absolute blurring of the borders of life and death: Oh death, where is your sting?

Maybe Peter should have put it all together at the cross, or at the resurrection or even at the ascension of Christ. But it takes a vision from God and an entourage sent by the

powerful Centurion Cornelius and his subsequent testimony and finally the tangible visit of the Holy Spirit to move Peter from a theology of exclusivity to one of inclusivity. For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. [John 3:16] The promise has no borders and that - that really is good news.

A 21st century perspective

To bring this New Testament story into our 21st century reality, we need to look no further than the refugee situation.

In the face of the world's trauma to refugees and their desperate movement to various parts of the world, the words of the Bible echo the depth of this tragedy in the history of mankind. In the depths of the pain of humanity, God is manifested, sends His Church, chooses His people and asks them to be the face of the merciful God. In order not to lose the compass of the Church in the midst of the confusion of the world, the Church goes back to its source - the living Word of God. And the trajectory of that compass: to establish the kingdom of God today and now.

Yet, in truth, even with the benefit of 2,000 years of Christian process and thought, and three centuries of Church councils wrestling to define for us grace and justice and the inclusive nature of the Trinity, we still struggle to understand that we are 'the other'. In some true sense - each and every one of us is, by definition, a refugee. God's love can only save and redeem me because the Almighty, Omnipotent Creator and Sustainer of Life allows his borders to be breached by you, by me, by us. He becomes vulnerable so that I can be brought in. He becomes 'other' from the divine Godhead, to become 'like me' in my humanity. He defeats the power of death and blurs the lines with his resurrection. Where our human nature defines itself by the color of our skin, God becomes flesh. Where we guard the hope of eternity through right religion, God becomes a doorway. Where we write laws to be righteous, God lavishes grace with the gift of tongues. It is indeed Good News and Truth that God has no favorites. I am 'the other', each of us a refugee, and yet miraculously, in the kingdom of God, we belong.

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