

April 15, 2018
National Presbyterian Church
The End of Race
Acts 10:9-33, 34-48
David Renwick,

In our sermons through the winter and spring we've been looking together at the early church, in a book in the Bible called *The Acts of the Apostles*

The major figure in the book is a man called PAUL (whose Jewish name was Saul). Paul is prominent in 19 of the 28 chapters; and in the second half of the book in particular, Chapters 11-28, he is clearly the central character.

It's through this man, Paul, that the gospel spreads far beyond tiny Palestine, far beyond magnificent Jerusalem, far beyond God's ancient people, into the heartlands of the empire of Rome – to include people of every tongue and tribe and nation, both Jews and Gentiles which therefore includes, *You and Me!*

So, the story of Paul the great missionary and the expansion of the church to become a world-wide movement, dominates the second half of *Acts*.

Whereas, in the first half, Paul shares the limelight with Jesus' closest friend, SIMON PETER. It's Peter who is the primary figure in the first 12 chapters, and then Peter simply disappears from the story by the end of Chapter 15.

In the early days of the church, though, he's clearly the most courageous disciple; he's the first leader of the Christian church; on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit comes and the church is born he's the disciple on central stage; he's the person who preaches the first Christian sermon after Jesus; he's the one who repeatedly emphasizes that he preaches about Jesus not just because Jesus was a great teacher but because he, Peter, saw Jesus brutally murdered on a Friday, and then saw him alive and well again a couple of days later, on the Sunday. Despite the fact that Peter was often wishy-washy, it's Peter who is the voice of God when sin is dramatically rooted out of the early church, and he's among those who realize that unless the church is "organized to love," and has structures to love, then the love manifested by the community will never be just or fair (in other words, even though Peter generally lives by his feelings, he comes to see that "the feeling of love" is not adequate to ensure that love permeates a whole community).

So Peter's role is huge as the church gets off the ground, and in the first days of the church, there is no question that he is the most authoritative person in the whole enterprise. And this is important to know, because *without Peter's consent or approval,*

- the church would never have moved from "the first half of *Acts* to the second half"!
- Paul would never have held the authority to lead the church to become a world-wide movement stretching across the whole of the Mediterranean world and the Roman world of that time: the Middle East, Southern Europe and North Africa
- and the church would have remained a small sect of Jewish believers-in-Jesus, based in Palestine, and centered in Jerusalem
- and ***WE would not be here today.***

But getting Peter's consent for this growth and expansion, and for passing the baton of leadership to Paul, and to a whole host of people who weren't born and bred Jews – like Peter – was no sure thing. It never is with anyone *letting go of power and privilege and ideas inbred from childhood*; letting go of “the way things have always been.” This is never easy for anyone.

In fact, I've always been intrigued by one of the repeated findings from studies of growing and declining churches, which show that *there is no one program or tactic that can ensure growth!*

The only major thing that can be said with assurance is that *congregations that truly decide to grow – Grow! And congregations that decide not to grow – Don't grow!*

Or let me put it like this: almost everyone in the church says “I want my church to thrive, and reach out and change”! And some do: it actually happens; they want it so much that they'll find a way to make it happen. BUT when nothing happens, most often it's because, deep down, people really don't want to change at all, so they'll find ways to undermine any step in a new direction (usually quietly!), and everyone ends up back where they started: on square one, believing their heart was in it – when it really wasn't!

And this could so easily have been true of Peter. Peter was no great visionary! He was a rural fisherman based on a gorgeous lake, surrounded by glorious hills in Northern Israel. And when Jesus died – and even after Peter knew Jesus was alive again – what Peter really wanted to do was to leave Jerusalem and go home and fish (John 21:3). So that leading an organization, based in the big city of Jerusalem, with big city people, must have been a stretch for him, let alone, contemplating the idea of leading an international organization with people flooding in from across the world!

SO – given this background, Peter could easily have said, “Enough! Let's keep things the way they are.” And could well have claimed, in addition, significant Biblical authority for holding to the status quo, stemming largely, from what we now call the Old Testament “Kosher Food Laws” (what the Rabbis called “Kashrut”— the laws of religious purity) that created a visible distinction between Jews and Gentiles, between Jews and people of every other race – between “us and them” (whoever “us” and “them” are!): a distinction reinforced multiple times every single day, especially when you sat down to eat!

New Testament scholar, Tom Wright, puts it like this:

We must remind ourselves that one of the basic points about the Jewish food laws wasn't just that Jews weren't allowed to eat pork, or a whole range of forbidden meat, listed, for example, in Leviticus 11.

BUT that these food laws served to mark out the Jewish people from their non-Jewish neighbors. And that this rule was reinforced by the prohibition of Jews eating and sharing table fellowship with non-Jews.

The reasoning is clear: the people you sit down to eat with are ‘family’ but the Jewish ‘family’ has been called by God to be separate, to bear witness to God's special love and grace to the world, and therefore MUST NOT compromise with the world

Acts for Everyone, Part 1, WJK, 2008, p.159-160

So every day, with every meal, this distinction – this sense of being special was reinforced, until it became second nature, and until casual relationships with non-Jewish friends became difficult or even impossible – causing a separation that would lead in time to other prejudices rising up

from both sides (Jews vs. Gentiles; and Gentiles vs. Jews), creeping into the picture, and hardening the divide and separation.

This was Peter's background, and the chances of his rising above it were surely slim to none:

- Handing over authority to an upstart like Paul, Jewish as he was, but not part of the original team?
- Opening up the church to what it was to become: a world that was foreign to Peter?
- Bringing Gentiles like you and me into the household of God on an equal footing? – with no sense of racial or spiritual superiority?

You have to be kidding! Not easy!

And almost certainly Peter would not have done it without God's remarkable intervention, which is what our story in Acts 10 is all about.

In the story in Acts 10, God figuratively "hits him over the head," entering his head and heart with a new vision, and with a series of events that he could not deny as pointing to the hand of God

Let me read some of the passage again, beginning with the vision Peter experiences in Joppa (= now a Suburb of modern day Tel Aviv, called Jaffa).

Acts 10:9-16

⁹And about noon, one day, Peter went up on the roof of the house he was staying in – to pray.

¹⁰He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance.

¹¹He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners.

¹²In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. (DR: animals deemed unclean in Leviticus in the Bible).

¹³Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat."

¹⁴But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean."

¹⁵The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

¹⁶This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

And pretty much immediately after this event, three servants of a Gentile – the Roman soldier, Cornelius – arrive at the house in Joppa, looking for a man called Peter, and urging him to go with them to visit Cornelius. And Peter immediately realizes that the two events are connected, and he knows that this is the right thing - the God thing - to do. So, despite whatever interpretation of the Bible he had before; despite whatever prejudices he had built up over the years; despite any fear of condemnation he might have that he'd be ostracized by his fellow Jewish Christians, Peter goes! He leaves his own turf and in entering Cornelius's house steps into a world that was inconceivable before – saying (10:28)

"You yourselves know that it is 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.

And with that move, implicit permission was given by the most important figure in the church at that time for the church to move out of its original, highly limited, cozy, setting and into the big, wide and massively confusing world of his day. A world not too dissimilar to the world you and I live in today.

This morning, THERE ARE TWO LESSONS from this event that I want to leave with you

I. The first is very general

and has to do with any **limits we put on God's work, or on God's call, to stretch ourselves in some way or another, and enter new territory we've never entered before – for God.**

- Think of a relationship in which we cannot forgive someone for what they've done. They've become "unclean" to us in a sense; and we say to God and them: "I'm never going to forgive them, that's a step too far; and yet we still pray, 'forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors!'"

OR

- Think of our money, in which we know in our heads that none of it belongs to us: we're just stewards. And we hear God's word calling us to become generous – tithers, givers for God's work way beyond anything we've ever done before. But we can't, or we won't! We have other priorities: and so we say "no"!

OR

- Think of the path for your future. Maybe God presents us with a bold adventure, something that involves a major disruption to our comfort, to our circle of friends and family: Maybe it's a call to ministry? Or a new profession? And we're scared about what others might say or think; or scared of failing. So we stay in the box! STUCK!

Which is where Peter could have been and remained. But thank God, for your sake and mine, he didn't!!

- **That's the first lesson: whatever your box is, allow God to mess with the boundaries.**

II. The second is more specific

and has to do with **race and prejudice, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.**

Our passage is inescapably about race. In fact the Gospel of Jesus Christ is inescapably about race. It's about peace to ALL (remember the Christmas story?! It's about living with people of every race and background in the Kingdom of God (remember Revelation 7:9? John 3:16 and Matthew 28:19-20): We're all on the same level in God's sight; all on the same playing field. Not just later, but now!

When it comes to matters of race and the Bible, there are two pivotal moments.

- One of these moments is the moment of CREATION – in which every human being is made in the image of God. To denigrate another human being because of their race or class or education is to spit in the face of God! It is a denial of our belief in the creation; a denial of our affirmation in the Apostles Creed, that we believe in "God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth."
- And the other is the moment of REDEMPTION – in which Jesus, a Jew, demonstrates God's love for the world by dying as a sacrifice: Not just for the sins of the Jews; and not

just for the sins of the Gentiles. But for the sins of us all. There is no one beyond the pale for Jesus because of race. No one any more profane or unclean than any other.

And while for over a thousand years, God formed and separated out a particular people to bring a particular person into the world – Jesus – and called them his chosen race and people, what Peter had to realize, and did, was that that moment of racial separation, and unintended superiority was NOW over: Mission accomplished! New day at hand! And God’s focus was now on restoring his relationship with people of every tongue and tribe and race and nation; and ON our restoring our relationships in the same way, with people of every tongue and tribe and race and nation, and all on a level footing.

And this is not just a matter of being nice (which is not a bad start), but of doing the hard stuff that Peter did:

- leaving his own turf, his own background, his own world
 - and entering the world; the house, the home of the other
- Peter didn’t tell Cornelius to come to him, to enter Peter’s house, on his terms – but he left Joppa and went to him.

Last June, the *National Association of Evangelicals*, along with *The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission* of the Southern Baptist Convention, the *Colson Center for Christian Worldview* and *Prison Fellowship*, wrote a public paper called “*Responding to Crime and Incarceration: A Call to the Church.*” Among other things – in this paper they responded to statistics like these from the Bureau of Justice: in the U.S.

- 1 in every 106 white men are incarcerated
- 1 in every 36 Hispanic men
- 1 in every 15 for African Americans. SEVEN times the statistics for whites.

The report from this group of conservative evangelicals – not normally known as bleeding-heart liberals, concludes:

Data collected by state and federal agencies have increasingly made clear the disproportional impact that our justice system has on racial minorities – and contributes to racial inequality.

- Communities of color are subject to higher-than-average rates of traffic stops and police searches.
- African Americans are significantly more likely to be arrested for a drug crime, even though rates of drug use and trafficking are roughly equal across all races.
- When convicted, they are often subjected to harsher-than-average sentences
- and less likely to receive any form of reduced sentence, charge, or plea agreement, when compared to similarly situated individuals of non-African American descent.

https://www.prisonfellowship.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Justice-Declaration-White-Paper_FINAL.pdf

SOMETHING’S PROFOUNDLY WRONG. And while I do not believe that it is necessarily the role of the church, as a church, to fix it, I DO profoundly believe it is the role of the church to say to every single follower of Christ – *as Christian citizens*:

- We must never cease to examine our inner loves, prejudices, priorities and commitments;
- We must never cease to remember God’s passion in creation and in Redemption FOR ALL.

- We must always seek to follow Peter's example: breaking with the status quo if necessary, and even challenging everything we've learned before, even reading Scripture again to see it's deeper message is different from what we've always been led to believe

So that like Peter we can be instruments of God in creating a church, a nation and a world, that looks a little more like, and acts a little more like, the world-wide Kingdom of God, than it does right now.

Paul would not have been Paul – had it not been for Peter

And as racial outsiders – were it not for Peter – we would not be here today!

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