

Acts | The Incendiary Fellowship

The Son of Jonah

Jonah 1.1-3, Acts 10.1-20

4.30.17

The word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, ² "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me." ³ But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

*(Acts 10) Now there was a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort, ² a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually. ³ About the ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had just come in and said to him, "Cornelius!" ⁴ And fixing his gaze on him and being much alarmed, he said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵ "Now dispatch some men to Joppa and send for a man named Simon, who is also called Peter; ⁶ he is staying with a tanner named Simon, whose house is by the sea." ⁷ When the angel who was speaking to him had left, he summoned two of his servants and a devout soldier of those who were his personal attendants, ⁸ and after he had explained everything to them, he sent them to **Joppa**.*

⁹ On the next day, as they were on their way and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. ¹⁰ But he became hungry and was desiring to eat; but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance; ¹¹ and he saw the sky opened up, and an object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, ¹² and there were in it all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. ¹³ A voice came to him, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat!" ¹⁴ But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean." ¹⁵ Again a voice came to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy." ¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the object was taken up into the sky.

¹⁷ Now while Peter was greatly perplexed in mind as to what the vision which he had seen might be, behold, the men who had been sent by Cornelius, having asked directions for Simon's house, appeared at the gate; ¹⁸ and calling out, they were asking whether Simon, who was also called Peter, was staying there. ¹⁹ While Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. ²⁰ "But get up, go downstairs and accompany them without misgivings, for I have sent them Myself."

Today we begin a new series at St. Andrews. This is the first book of Christian Church history, The Acts of the Apostles. It's the second volume of Luke's Gospel – Luke move TO Jerusalem...Acts moves FROM Jerusalem.

We actually started this study last year (after Easter) and we find ourselves NOW at about the halfway point.

Today's section is a TIPPING POINT...a moment that has a profound effect on HISTORY...not just sacred or church history but it changes the course of human events. Luke devotes MORE ink to THIS episode than to any other story in his second volume – longest narrative in The Book of Acts... And it's hard, if you read these 70 verses...it's HARD to miss the prominence of this story in the whole 2-Volume work...this development ...this Paradigm Shift.

It's the dawning of a new stage in what the German theologians called, "Heilsgeschichte" – the history of salvation – God's unfolding plan through Jesus Christ to rescue this planet and to usher in a New Creation. THIS event with Simon Peter and a Roman soldier (Cornelius) marks a NEW STAGE in Heilsgeschichte.

And IN ORDER for God's unfolding plan to UNFOLD and advance...something had to give...it was a view or mindset that was ONCE proper and had its place but it had also been really misunderstood and NOW when Jesus Christ's LIFE, DEATH and RESURRECTION had taken place... this OLD mindset/worldview had to go... BUT...as we'll see, it would NOT go quietly: it was (and IS) very deeply entrenched...it would require an explosion...in fact several...to be dislodged.

Let's see: 1) A Great Obstacle (then and now) 2) Attempts to Clear the Obstacle (that really don't work!) 3) How ONLY the Gospel Breaks Through and How

Peter was the lead-apostle...He answered the Big Question, "Who do you say that I am?" and (Matthew 16), "Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.'" (16-18)

It was the breakthrough moment (a paradigm shift of its own) and Jesus calls Peter by his whole name, "Simon Bar Jonah" – Simon Son of Jonah. I will build My Church on YOU and on your profession of faith – YOU GET IT, Simon Son of Jonah!

But as is so often the case... Simon Peter sees but he doesn't see...AND now after the resurrection of Jesus Christ and AS the news is spreading, "from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria to the ENDS OF THE EARTH" – Peter and the other disciples are blocked from seeing the magnitude of Jesus Christ's work – it's much BIGGER than they realize...and today Peter has a triple vision that will begin to remove the obstacle so God's mission can proceed!

Let me try to highlight this Great Obstacle as it was faced by Peter and the first Christians AND also how it faces US today... it's a recurrent problem.

Simon Peter was an observant Jew...so were all the Apostles and all the earliest Christians. And they had a way of looking at the world that was very definitely "US vs. THEM" – and to one degree or another EVERY PERSON (not just ancient Jewish persons) but every person adopts some variety of this "Us vs. Them" mentality (I'll get to that in a minute) but for the Israelites this way of looking at the world was ALSO linked to their national identity as the people of God.

The Israelites were the Chosen People...the people of Abraham. God had married them/covenant. And they were to be separated from the other nations who did NOT know God... Everything about their national life reinforced this identity as the people of the Covenant...their clothing...the way they planted crops...their foods... their calendar...child-rearing ...business practices...worship...their history (stories of the Patriarchs and the Exodus) – it all screamed to them that they were chosen therefore different.

BUT...because we are ALL fallen people...the ancient Israelites sort of reversed the order in their minds, not "chosen therefore different" but instead "different therefore CHOSEN." That's an immense difference...night and day...grace vs. karma.

They were supposed to think, "God chose us JUST because He wanted to demonstrate His mercy and give the world a glimpse...and therefore we are to be different" – that's the order of grace leading to holiness... BUT BECAUSE WE ARE ALL FALLEN, the order became, "WE ARE REALLY HOLY/SPECIAL that's why God chose us...because we're better than the other nations..." That's the order of karma/works...

And it led to a deep sense of racial superiority among the ancient Israelites. It wasn't supposed to have that effect (Dt 7.7-8 et al) but we all DO that we turn grace into karma and we try to make it about our deserving...and our superiority.

And while we may be critical of the ancient Jews and critical of Peter for their religiously reinforced racial superiority – BUT we should note that it IS the DEFAULT MODE of the human heart – to do all we can to foster a sense of personal and group superiority. We try desperately to account for the gifts in our lives by a sense that we deserved them.

We try to lie to ourselves that I and MY KIND are just a little better than other people...it can be racial superiority (based on the amount of melanin we have in our skin (brown people have more and pale people have less) and that becomes a way for somehow assigning a pecking order of superiority.

OR it could be taste in music or clothing or the fact that you were in the military or graduated

from college or you are MALE or are from this/that region or are a fourth-generation Presbyterian ...cultural superiority...class superiority... educational...religious ...gender...political affiliation ... WE CAN DO IT WITH ANYTHING...and we do!

And you may think... “Well sure I think it’s better to be educated than not-educated... but I don’t look down of people for it...or look down on white people or look down on men... republicans...or non-citizens ... I DON’T FEEL SUPERIOR... I’m not a bigot.”

And I’m not on a witch-hunt here (maybe my own sense of entitlement MY superiority-complex IS much worse than YOURS) but I will point out that in the case of Simon Bar Jonah... he didn’t think HE was a bigot... Did you notice? He didn’t call it racism, he called it holiness: “By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean.” (14)

Like so many areas of self-understanding – it’s all a lot more slippery than we think!

And now Simon Peter...with this mindset...is in the town of Joppa... Joppa is only mentioned a few times in all the Hebrew Bible but notoriously it’s the PORT from which the Prophet Jonah ran from God.

God had called Jonah to the Great City of Nineveh where they were really, really wicked and where they HATED the Israelites...and Jonah was called to go to these horrible Gentile people and tell them to stop their child-sacrifice and their other violence so that God wouldn’t have to judge them... but Jonah WANTED God to JUDGE THEM...so Jonah ran away and instead of going a few hundred miles EAST, decided to charter a boat and go like 2000 miles to the WEST...and the port of departure was Joppa.

Joppa was where Jonah tried to de-rail the mission of God to give grace to the Gentiles AND Joppa is where God met with Simon, Son of Jonah (500 years later) to put the train back on the track!

Simon Bar Jonah has an experience with the God of grace...He has three visions (like his three denials and his three restorations! Some people are like that and that’s why we LOVE Peter!) and God is saying to this New Jonah – “I determine who and what is clean – it’s by MY grace and choosing NOT by your genetic superiority or your obedience or cultural advantages or self-confidence... acceptance with ME is based on MY DOING...it’s My autonomous grace... NEVER YOUR SUPERIORITY!

And then, after these three bombs...Peter is only at a loss and gets a fourth bomb: the Spirit of God says to Peter, “I’m sending three men to get you – go with them and DON’T doubt... I HAVE SENT THEM MYSELF!”

And Peter embarks on a journey to Caesarea and a consequential meeting with these uclean

Gentiles (Italians! Yuck!) that begins to change him (he still has hang-ups – see Galatians CH 2!) but this is a paradigm shift for him and for the church and for human history

Now, I'm pretty sure that no one here WANTS to be a supremacist... few people want to be racist or sexist or arrogantly looking down on other people.

But the measures we take against this obstacle, the ways we often combat this mindset usually fail.

One way is what I might call the CONSERVATIVE approach is to say, "Hey! Everyone is welcome! I don't discriminate against anyone! WHOEVER WANTS TO BE LIKE ME WILL NOT BE TURNED AWAY!"

This is the assimilationist approach... "I'm not an elitist or a segregationist – anyone who wants to JOIN ME WILL BE ACCEPTED! We'll happily make YOU like us! "

Now, that's probably better than the "keep out" approach...and maybe it's the best that governments are able to do but it still maintains... but it still maintains the elitism and doesn't scale the obstacle!

The other approach we might call the LIBERAL approach or RELATIVIST approach that says, "All things are the same...maleness...femaleness... differences...are all equally valid and really just the same...and we should ignore differences and be TOTALLY TOLERANT..." So often condescending!

Again maybe this is the best that governments can do...just try to sort of ignore and tolerate. Of course to tolerate may be better than to discriminate against and exclude...but tolerance isn't LOVE.

What we find in the Gospel (and this is our last point) is NOT the conservative/assimilationist take NOR is it the liberal/tolerance approach – it's grace leading to LOVE.

Peter doesn't say to Cornelius, "Oh yeah...tell him he's fine just the way he is...we're both basically the same – no need for me to go and change him!"

NOR, "Yeah...if he wants to be like me – he's welcome – let him get circumcised and be Jewish like I am!"

No – Peter goes to him...embraces him...enters in...Peter hears the voice of the Lord say, "What I say is clean – don't YOU say it's not good enough!"

The vision of those grub-worms and lizards and pigs – those things really were UNCLEAN (according to the Law) but I CAN DECLARE THEM CLEAN – that’s what I did with YOU Peter...I AM THE ONE WHO MAKES CLEAN BY MY DECLARATION... Peter, you didn’t become clean by your genetics or even by following Jesus – I declared YOU clean!”

It’s never by pedigree or performance – it’s by declaration. BECAUSE MY BELOVED SON stepped in to live, die and rise again for YOU...and because I applied that to your life...I declared it and I spoke light into your soul and you believed (2 Cor 4.6) – that’s how YOU became clean...and that’s how Cornelius will be clean!”

See, Peter, you are just as unclean as Cornelius until I say so...and YOU will keep on forgetting that – your constant temptation will be to think that YOU made some contribution to your own clean-ness...BUT I WILL CONSTANTLY remind you by the Gospel that your being acceptable to Me is My doing – it’s by what Jesus Christ accomplished and it’s ALWAYS A GIFT – always by grace and only grace!

The way the Gospel resists the superiority-complex in those who believe it is that we look at the worst people in society and realize, “But for the grace of God so go I” – the only thing that separates me from anyone else is that Jesus obeyed in my place, died under my penalty...rose to prove I am accepted!”

That’s why I can embrace people (not just tolerate them) and I can appreciate people (not ONLY when they become LIKE me) and I can forgive others because God has forgiven me a MOUNTAIN of debt and God has ADOPTED me...I’m privileged beyond what I’ll ever understand!”

Jesus Christ became poor...and stripped...and ashamed... so I could be embraced, and clothed and free from condemnation... I’m only clean because God declared me so... and that explodes any sense that I’m superior to anyone.

Next week – the rest of the story!