

July 18, 2010
Political Correction
Acts 10:1-35

In university I got to know a Ph.D. student from Sri Lanka named Has. I introduced Has to Canadian culture, Canadian food, and Canadian snow. He introduced me to Sri Lankan culture and Sri Lankan food. We also talked a lot about life. We talked about our spiritual faith. Has was from a Hindu background. We talked about his religion. I talked with him about Jesus. It was a wonderful cross-cultural friendship and an inter-faith dialogue. In Acts 10, Peter - a good Jewish man who, in good Jewish fashion kept his circle of friends limited to other good Jewish people - finds himself in the middle of a cross-cultural friendship and an inter-faith dialogue ...

Jonah, Peter and Cornelius

Caesarea is a port city in what is now Israel. It was a bustling city, the civilian and military capital of Judea. One of the other Romans who lived there was a centurion (roughly equivalent of a sergeant), Cornelius. During his term of service in Judea, Cornelius heard about the God of the Jews and he (and his family) believed. He was a Roman convert to Judaism. Acts also notes that he lived out his faith by giving generously to the poor and praying regularly.

As Cornelius prayed one afternoon, an angel called him by name and told him to send to Joppa to bring Simon (a.k.a. Peter). (Aside: God gets our attention in interesting ways! I have had God - whether it's an angel, the Holy Spirit, or a quiet voice - direct me at times. Of course there are checks and balances. God never leads us to do anything contrary to His ethics or His Word.)

So we hurry off to Joppa, 60-70 kms south. Remember Joppa? Way back in the Old Testament, God had called Jonah to go east to Nineveh (modern day Iraq) and preach against the Assyrians for their wickedness. What was Jonah's response? The Assyrians were the enemy! They were cruel, violent, warlike people. They were certainly not respectable, God-fearing folks like the Jews! God and His salvation was for the Jews, not Assyrian warlords! So Jonah went down to Joppa, found a fast, westbound ship bound for places as far away from Nineveh as possible. Jonah is a place you face challenging choices: what choice are you going to make?

Peter is now in Joppa. And while he is there he has a vision in which God's Spirit encourages him to eat foods forbidden in the Jewish tradition. Leviticus 11 makes it clear that certain foods are strictly taboo for Jews. They were only allowed to eat "kosher," "clean" foods. So Peter says, "Surely not, Lord!" God doesn't him off the hook. He repeats the vision two more times.

Cornelius was a Roman - the enemy - a cruel, violent, warlike people. They were responsible (in part) for Jesus' crucifixion. Surely Jesus and His salvation were for the Jews, but not Roman warlords! Besides, it was against Jewish law for Peter to go and talk to a Roman. But Peter is willing to obey God. He is willing to talk with Cornelius about Jesus. And Cornelius and "all who heard" believed (reminiscent of the Ninevites' response to Jonah, when he finally got there).

That sounds ... normal. No problem. But to Peter it was just as stupendous as Jonah showing up in the wicked city of Nineveh. Jesus was for the Jews. Even though Jesus had talked about going to all the world, for Peter that still meant only to the Jews throughout the world. It couldn't possibly mean the Romans ... It would be just as incredible as an Israeli walking into a Palestinian camp - peacefully, with good news, seeking to bless the people there. As a Christian and a Muslim having coffee together after 9/11. This was - in its time - living on the edge.

The church down here and the church up there ...

Billy Graham once described Sunday morning at 11 as the most segregated hour in America. Whites go to white churches. African-Americans go to African-American churches. In most cities the pattern continues: Hispanics go to Hispanic churches; Chinese go to Chinese churches; Koreans go to Korean churches; Middle Eastern people go to Middle Eastern churches ...

People don't do this because they're racist. They choose to segregate themselves in ethnic churches or churches of people "just like us." Is that right? Or is the Kingdom of God - and church - supposed to be multi-ethnic and multi-cultural? Jesus welcomed all people into His Kingdom. He welcomed Samaritans, Romans, people of different abilities, men and women and children, people of all socio-economic backgrounds ... Paul writes of the Church that *"it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us."* (Colossians 3:11)

Some of us may be in for a rude shock when we discover that we can't segregate heaven into neat boxes with people just like us. John, in his vision of heaven, describes, *sees "a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb ... shouting with a mighty shout, 'Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!'"* (Revelation 7:9-10)

The challenge for us is that the church down here (us, right now) should look like the church up there ... I am excited about how diverse our congregation is - not just ethnically, but also in terms of the range of ages, experiences, backgrounds, abilities, resources and other measures. That is how it ought to be! But we can continue to challenge ourselves to be more and more inclusive. I am thinking in terms of how we relate to visitors Sunday morning (who comes to us). But also in terms of who we go out to. Who do we make friends with? Who do we spend time with? Is it just people like us ... or do we reach out to the "other"?

One of the issues we need to talk about as Lethbridge Christians, is how we relate to First Nations people ... to the LDS community ... to non-religious people. We live in a city with the second highest rate of people living in poverty in Alberta (behind Edmonton); what does that mean for us? How do we come to grips with that? We live in a community where as many or more people will be at the casino or in the bingo hall on any given morning as at most churches Sunday morning. How do we bring the love of Jesus to those people? How would Jesus function in our city? Those are hard questions; there are no easy answers. Let's talk about it!

Living a life of political correction

On the one hand we can sit here this morning and say "amen" (figuratively) to a sermon on the truth that our church should welcome everyone who comes in the door (even better if it's someone else's church that needs to be more welcoming). We may be a little less comfortable hearing the message that we live in a community where there are groups of people we struggle to relate to. It is even less comfortable to think about how I will live and act intentionally in these relationships because of God's call to reach out, in His love, to all people.

Do I see other people - people who are not like me, the recent immigrant, the person with a different religion - as a threat or as a God-given opportunity? I can feel threatened by "other" people. What if they ask questions I cannot answer? Why can't they go somewhere else so I don't have to deal with them. But that's not going to happen is it?

Or is God giving me the opportunity to be His ambassador, right here? The reality is that the mission field is coming to Lethbridge. I don't have to go overseas to share God's love with a person with a different religion - he's now my neighbour. And whereas I could never share my faith with, for example, a Muslim in Iran or Iraq, I can here ...

What this calls me to, however, is to radically rethink how I see myself as a follower of Jesus. Once upon a time Canada was nominally a "Christian" nation (I'm not sure this really was true, but that's the story). In a Christian culture, I didn't really have to have a living personal relationship with Jesus ... I just did what everyone did - went to church, lived a good life, etc. The culture was a watered-down, generic reflection of "Christian" values. The church produced generations of "good" people ... who (on the surface anyway) lived by watered-down, generic Christian values. But they didn't know Jesus. I need to understand that I now live in a mission field, not a vague Christian culture. Nominal Christianity isn't going to cut it anymore. I need to be serious about my faith. To really pray. To really read Scripture. To really wrestle with what it means to be a follower of Jesus in a consumeristic, media-saturated society. To really live my faith. To live ethically. To ask how Jesus would live if he were in my community. To make a difference in God's name.

I may never have thought of myself in these terms before. I might prefer the idea of living in a comfortable Christian culture. But that's not reality anymore (if it ever was reality). Rather than getting bitter, or frustrated, I need to deal with this new reality. I can take it on as an exciting challenge, to live my life on the front lines of Christian living ...

The reality of living in a non-Christian culture also challenges us to radically rethink who we are as a church. In a nominally Christian culture, church is there - we may go and consume a service now and then. We see it as there for our benefit ... and we like it when it provides what I want - a comfortable service, good coffee, and so forth. And as a church we wait for people to come ...

But if we are in a missionary environment, the church becomes the mission station. What does a mission station do? It's where the missionaries come to be refreshed, renewed, encouraged, and

instructed. It's where we encourage one another, help one another, and pray one another. It's where we gather resources to make a real difference in the lives of the community. *And then we go out* as Jesus' disciples into our community again and we live His Kingdom through our lives, actions, words, and acts of love and mercy.

When we see church this way it's not about what I want from church. It's about wrestling with deep social issues: how do we deal with people of other faiths? How do we deal with issues in our community like poverty? Homelessness? Racism? How do we educate ourselves, our youth and our children to live as Christians in a non-Christian environment? How do we love our neighbours, in the name of Jesus? How do we be His ambassadors of love?

We need to be secure in our own faith. In a nominal Christian culture, you really don't need to know what you believe. You don't really need to know Jesus. The challenge of the environment in which we now live is we have to know what we believe. We need to be serious about learning our faith. We need to commit ourselves to praying and getting to know Jesus. That's a good thing!

We need to integrate our faith into our lives. In an increasingly non-Christian culture, we will not live like everyone else. We will not have the same ethical standards as everyone else. We will not live the same values (or lack of values) we see in the media. A wise pundit has said that "Faith in Jesus is more often caught than taught." Our non-Christian neighbours will see our faith in how we live. Yes, we need to share our faith verbally, but we earn the right to do so by living the lives of love and holiness that Jesus called us to.

This is hard! It was hard for Peter. It would have been easier for him to avoid Cornelius. It is easier to be a nominal Christian in a nominally Christian culture. It's more challenging to engage the reality of life on the missional frontier. But that's our reality. And it's also much more exciting. Life has more meaning and purpose. It has more opportunity for growth. We have the opportunity to change lives and change the world.

The good news is that we can trust God, that if He truly is our Creator, our Saviour, and our indwelling Counsellor, then we can trust Him to provide us with the courage, wisdom, and power we need to live for Him. Notice that Peter reached out in Jesus' love. It wasn't about Peter. It wasn't about whether he felt shy, uncomfortable, self-conscious, or inadequate. He obeyed God. He shared Jesus' love. It was about Jesus, not about Peter.

We need to trust the Holy Spirit and the power of God. We don't need to be afraid. We don't need to be apprehensive. We can be confident that the One who began a good work in us will bring it to completion. John writes, "*You belong to God, my dear children. You have already won the victory because the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world.*" (1 John 4:4).

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