

Acts 11:1-18  
May 2, '10

“AHA!”

IN THE MOVIE “THE MIRCLE WORKER” THAT TELLS THE STORY OF THE EARLY LIFE OF HELEN KELLER, ANNE BANCROFT PLAYS THE ROLE OF HER TEACHER, ANNIE SULLIVAN & PATTY DUKE PLAYS THE YOUNG HELEN.

ANNIE TRIES FOR MONTHS TO GET HELEN – BLIND & DEAF – TO UNDERSTAND SIGN LANGUAGE.

IT IS ALL, SEEMINGLY, TO NO AVAIL.

BUT ANNIE DOESN'T GIVE UP & ONE DAY, WHILE PUMPING WATER INTO THE LITTLE GIRL'S HANDS, SHE FINALLY UNDERSTANDS & MOUTHS THE WORD “WATER” AND SIGNS IT INTO HER TEACHER'S HAND.

IT IS A POWERFULLY MOVING MOMENT & A MOMENT THAT CHANGES HELEN KELLER'S LIFE FOREVER.

IT WAS, FOR HER, AN “AHA!” MOMENT.

HER ENTIRE WORLD CHANGED AS A RESULT OF THAT BREAKTHROUGH.

YOU'VE HAD SUCH “AHA!” MOMENTS IN YOUR OWN LIFE, HAVEN'T YOU?

MAYBE IT WAS IN SCHOOL – PERHAPS AN ALGEBRA CLASS – A CLASS THAT LEFT YOU COMPLETELY BAFFLED & FRUSTRATED.

ONE DAY, SOMETHING HAPPENED OR WAS EXPLAINED IN A NEW WAY & SUDDENLY IT CLICKED.

“OH, NOW I GET IT!” AND EVERYTHING SUDDENLY FELL INTO PLACE.

YOU LOOKED BACK AT THOSE EQUATIONS & FORMULAS & THEORIES THAT MADE YOUR HEAD SPIN & SUDDENLY IT ALL MADE SENSE.

IT WAS AN “AHA!” MOMENT FOR YOU.

THIS IS WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO PETER IN THIS PASSAGE.

THE STORY OF PETER & CORNELIUS IS ONE OF THE LONGEST STORIES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.

WHAT WE'VE READ THIS MORNING IS A LONG STORY BUT THIS IS ONLY PART OF IT.

THE STORY BEGINS IN THE 10<sup>TH</sup> CHAPTER & THIS IS REALLY THE THIRD TIME LUKE TELLS THE SAME STORY.

HE TELLS IT FROM HIS OWN PERSPECTIVE AS THE WRITER.

HE TELLS IT FROM CORNELIUS' STANDPOINT & NOW HE TELLS IT – IN THE VERSES WE'VE READ – FROM PETER'S STANDPOINT.

THIS IS RATHER UNUSUAL FOR LUKE.

IN THE BOOK OF ACTS, HE HAS THINGS MOVING ALONG AT A VERY FAST PACE.

WHY WOULD HE SPEND SO MUCH TIME ON ONE SINGLE STORY AS HE HAS WITH THIS ONE?

THERE'S ANOTHER TIME IN ACTS WHEN HE DOES THE SAME THING.

HE TELLS THE STORY OF PAUL'S CONVERSION THREE TIMES AS WELL.

I THINK THE REASON THOSE TWO STORIES ARE REPEATED BY LUKE IS BECAUSE HE WANTS US TO KNOW THEY'RE BIG ONES.

THESE ARE THE IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW.

EVERYTHING ELSE HINGES ON THESE STORIES.

THIS STORY OF PETER & CORNELIUS – HALFWAY THROUGH ACTS – IS REALLY THE PIVOTAL MOMENT IN THE BOOK.

IT IS REALLY THE PIVOTAL MOMENT IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH.

EVERYTHING ELSE DEPENDS UPON THIS STORY.

IN THE SAME WAY THAT HELEN KELLER’S LIFE WAS NEVER THE SAME FROM THE “AHA!” MOMENT SHE EXPERIENCED WITH ANNE SULLIVAN, SO TOO, THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH WILL NEVER BE THE SAME FROM THIS MOMENT ON.

LOOKING AT IT FROM OUR PERSPECTIVE IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY, IT’S HARD FOR US TO GRASP HOW REVOLUTIONARY THIS EVENT WAS.

THE OLD TESTAMENT DIETARY REGULATIONS WEREN’T JUST A MATTER OF LAW – THEY WERE AN ESSENTIAL PART OF RELIGIOUS & COMMUNITY IDENTITY FOR THE JEWS.

THROUGHOUT THEIR HISTORY, THEY HAD BEEN SUBJECTED TO THOSE WHO TRIED TO FORCE THEM TO COMPROMISE THEIR BELIEFS & PRACTICES.

IN THE 2<sup>ND</sup> CENTURY B.C., IN A BOLD MOVE TO COMPLETELY ANNIHILATE JUDAISM, THE GREEK RULER ANTIOCHUS EPIPHANES ISSUED A SERIES OF EDICTS THAT CULMINATED IN HIS SEIZING OF THE TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM.

HE CONVERTED IT INTO A SHRINE TO ZEUS & SACRIFICED A PIG IN THE HOLY OF HOLIES.

THEN HE SENT SOLDIERS INTO THE VILLAGES, FORCING THE PEOPLE – ON THE THREAT OF DEATH – TO EAT PORK.

SOME COMPLIED, BUT OTHERS WERE WILLING TO DIE RATHER THAN DO SOMETHING THEY REGARDED AS SO REPUGNANT.

SO WHEN WE READ THIS PASSAGE IN ACTS, THIS IS NOT A SMALL MATTER TO PETER!

IT IS, IN EFFECT, A CHANGE FROM EVERYTHING HE HAD ALWAYS LEARNED WAS IMPORTANT IN HIS FAITH.

HE WAS FACED WITH NOTHING LESS THAN A TOTAL TRANSFORMATION OF HIS UNDERSTANDING OF GOD & GOD’S EXPECTATIONS OF HIM.

WITH THIS BACKGROUND, WHEN WE HEAR THAT THE BELIEVERS – HIS OWN FELLOW DISCIPLES – WERE UPSET WITH WHAT HE HAD DONE, WE CAN UNDERSTAND WHY.

THEY HAD EVERY RIGHT TO BE ANGRY AT HIM.

THEY HAD NO WAY TO KNOW WHAT GOD HAD TOLD PETER TO DO.

FROM THEIR STANDPOINT, PETER WAS VIRTUALLY ABANDONING THE FAITH!

I THINK THIS STORY RAISES SOME VERY IMPORTANT & RELEVANT ISSUES FOR US TODAY.

IS IT POSSIBLE THAT SOME THINGS THAT WERE ESSENTIAL IN THE PAST ARE NO LONGER ESSENTIAL TODAY?

COULD IT BE THAT SOMETHING THAT WAS A PERFECTLY LEGITIMATE WAY OF BELIEVING IS NO LONGER TRUE?

I REMEMBER A SEMINARY PROFESSOR - THE LATE HAROLD NEBELSICK - SAYING SOMETHING IN CLASS ON A REGULAR BASIS THAT I ALWAYS FOUND INTRIGUING.

DR. NEBELSICK – A PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY – WAS FOND OF SAYING, *“IF YOU WANT TO KEEP THE TRADITION, SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO CHANGE IT.”*

THAT SEEMS CONTRADICTORY, BUT IT’S NOT.

LET ME GIVE YOU A SIMPLE EXAMPLE – NOT FROM THE CHURCH, BUT FROM SOMETHING THAT IS PART OF OUR NATION’S TRADITION.

PERHAPS THE MOST WELL-KNOWN LINE IN THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE IS *“...ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL.”*

IT’S A LINE THAT ABRAHAM LINCOLN QUOTED IN THE GETTSBURG ADDRESS, A LINE QUOTED BY MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. IN HIS *“I HAVE A DREAM”* SPEECH.

IT’S PART OF OUR AMERICAN FABRIC.

DOES IT MEAN THE SAME THING TODAY, THOUGH, THAT IT MEANT THEN?

*“ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL.”*

WHETHER THOMAS JEFFERSON, ABRAHAM LINCOLN & MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. MEANT THAT WORD TO EXCLUDE HALF THE HUMAN RACE MAY BE UP FOR DISCUSSION, BUT NOT WHAT IT MEANS FOR US TODAY AS PART OF OUR NATIONAL TRADITION.

EQUALITY IS A HALLMARK OF AMERICAN LIFE – SOMETHING WE CHERISH & A TRADITION WE TRY TO UPHOLD.

BUT IF YOU WERE WRITING THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE TODAY, YOU WOULDN’T USE THE WORD *“MEN”* EVEN IF – IN YOUR MIND - YOUR INTENT WAS TO BE INCLUSIVE.

YOU’D SAY SOMETHING LIKE *“ALL HUMAN BEINGS,”* OR *“ALL PEOPLE,”* OR *“ALL OF US.”*

*“IF YOU WANT TO KEEP THE TRADITION, SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO CHANGE IT.”*

THE NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLAR N. T. WRIGHT OFFERS A GREAT ILLUSTRATION TO MAKE THIS POINT.

IF A MOTHER IS STANDING ON ONE SIDE OF THE STREET & HER DAUGHTER IS ON THE OTHER SIDE & THE MOTHER IS HELPING HER COME TO JOIN HER, SHE LOOKS AT CARS WHIZZING PAST & SAYS, *“STAY THERE. DON’T CROSS YET.”*

SOON THE CARS ARE PAST & SHE CALLS TO HER DAUGHTER, SAYING, *“OKAY, YOU CAN COME ACROSS NOW.”*

IS THE MOTHER CONTRADICTING HERSELF?

OF COURSE NOT.

THE FIRST COMMAND WAS THE RIGHT ONE FOR THAT TIME.

SHE WANTED HER DAUGHTER TO EVENTUALLY GET ACROSS & IF SHE HADN’T RESTRICTED HER INITIALLY, SHE MAY NEVER HAVE MADE IT ACROSS AT ALL.

THERE MAY BE A PROFOUND LESSON FOR US IN TERMS OF THE WAY IN WHICH GOD MAY BE SPEAKING SOMETHING NEW TO US.

I'M NOT OFFERING ANY SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS AS TO WHAT THAT IS, BUT IT CERTAINLY MAY BE RELATED TO SOMETHING SIMILAR TO THE DILEMMA PETER EXPERIENCED.

WHO'S "IN" AND WHO'S "OUT?"

ISN'T THAT WHAT GOT PETER INTO HOT WATER WITH HIS FELLOW DISCIPLES?

HOW COULD HE ACCEPT SOMEONE – HOW COULD HE BAPTIZE SOMEONE – HOW COULD EAT WITH SOMEONE WHO HADN'T GONE THROUGH ALL THE PREREQUISITES THAT WERE REQUIRED TO BECOMING A FULL-FLEDGED MEMBER OF THE FAITH COMMUNITY?

YOU MAY WANT TO GIVE THOUGHT TO WHO IT IS THAT YOU CONSIDER "OUT?"

WHO IS UNACCEPTABLE IN THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH?

UPON WHOM WOULD YOU SET SOME PREREQUISITES BEFORE THEY COULD BECOME FULL-FLEDGED MEMBERS OF THE FAITH COMMUNITY?

THIS "AHA!" EXPERIENCE FOR PETER WAS THE BEGINNING OF SOMETHING BRAND NEW IN THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.

PETER WAS BEING TOLD THAT THE DOORS WERE BEING OPENED, THE WALLS WERE COMING DOWN, THE BARRIERS WERE BEING SHATTERED.

NO LONGER WAS THE GOOD NEWS GOING TO BE CONFINED TO ONE CATEGORY OF PEOPLE, TO ONE NATIONALITY, TO ONE GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION.

IT WAS OPEN TO EVERYONE.

THIS WAS AN "AHA!" MOMENT FOR PETER & FOR THE ENTIRE CHURCH.

I WONDER WHAT IT SAYS TO US.

PERHAPS THE GREATEST TASK OF THE CHURCH TODAY IS TO FIND OUT WHERE GOD IS ALREADY WORKING IN THE WORLD & THEN PARTICIPATE IN THAT WORK AS GOD DIRECTS US.

PERHAPS WE HAVE TOO OFTEN MISSED THE NEW WORK OF GOD IN THE WORLD BECAUSE WE WERE WAITING FOR SOMETHING TO HAPPEN IN OUR OWN LITTLE CORNER OF GOD'S CREATION.

MAYBE WE'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR GOD TO DO GREAT THINGS IN OUR MIDST WHEN GOD IS ALREADY DOING GREAT THINGS OVER AT CORNELIUS' HOUSE! AMEN.

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