

Acts 10:25-48
July 19, '09

“GOD AT WORK IN THE LIFE OF CORNELIUS”

(Before scripture)

A LOGICAL QUESTION THAT IS ASKED OF SOMEONE FOLLOWING A VACATION IS, “*WHAT DID YOU DO?*”

A LOGICAL RESPONSE IS, “*OH, IT WAS WONDERFUL. WE DID THIS & WE DID THAT & WE WENT HERE & WE WENT THERE & WE SAW THIS & WE SAW THAT.*”

MY RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION IS, “*OH, IT WAS WONDERFUL. WE DID NOTHING.*”

CAN YOU IMAGINE?

TWO WEEKS OF NO INTERNET, NO TELEVISION, NO NEWSPAPERS.

JUST BOOKS. LOTS & LOTS OF BOOKS.

UNLIKE MANY OF YOU, I AM NOT A FAST READER.

I HAVE NEVER LEARNED HOW TO SKIM THINGS, NOR HAVE I MASTERED THE ART OF SPEED READING.

I READ EVERY WORD, USUALLY VERY SLOWLY.

NOW, ORDINARILY ON VACATION, THE BOOKS I READ – OTHER THAN A FEW “CHURCHY” BOOKS – ARE MINDLESS MYSTERIES & “AIRPLANE” BOOKS – YOU KNOW, THE BOOKS YOU READ JUST FOR ENTERTAINMENT TO PASS THE TIME.

THIS YEAR, THOUGH, I READ A BOOK THAT – IN PREVIOUS VACATIONS – I WAS TEMPTED TO TRY BUT WAS TOO INTIMIDATED TO TACKLE.

WASHINGTON’S CROSSING IS PART OF THE OXFORD PRESS SERIES ENTITLED “*PIVOTAL MOMENTS IN AMERICAN HISTORY.*”

THE POINT OF THE SERIES IS TO TAKE AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT EVENTS IN AMERICAN HISTORY THAT HAD A PROFOUND IMPACT ON WHO WE ARE AS A NATION – EVENTS THAT HAVE MADE US WHAT WE ARE TODAY.

THERE ARE SUCH MOMENTS IN THE BIBLE AS WELL.

THERE ARE EVENTS THAT CAN BE LABELLED “*PIVOTAL MOMENTS IN CHRISTIANITY.*”

THE PASSAGE THAT IS OUR FOCUS THIS MORNING IS ONE SUCH MOMENT.

IT’S FOUND IN THE BOOK OF ACTS & I THINK IT’S SAFE TO SAY THAT WITHOUT THIS EVENT THE CHURCH WOULD BE SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT FROM WHAT IT IS TODAY.

WE KNOW THIS IS AN IMPORTANT EVENT BECAUSE LUKE DEVOTES AN ENTIRE CHAPTER TO IT.

IT IS THE LONGEST SINGLE NARRATIVE IN THE ENTIRE BOOK OF ACTS.

THE SPACE LUKE DEVOTES TO THIS EVENT REVEALS HOW CONTROVERSIAL IT WAS & HOW IMPORTANT IT WAS TO THE SPREAD OF THE GOSPEL.

ENTIRE SECTIONS IN CHAPTERS 11 & 15 IN ACTS ARE DEVOTED TO THIS MOMENT AS LUKE RECAPITULATES THE IMPLICATIONS OF WHAT HAPPENED HERE.

WE WON'T READ THE ENTIRE CHAPTER, BUT LET ME SET THE STAGE FOR WHAT WE *WILL* BE READING.

CORNELIUS IS A GENTILE – A NON-JEW.

HE'S A CENTURION IN THE ROMAN ARMY – A MAN OF CONSIDERABLE IMPORTANCE & ALSO A VERY HONORABLE & HIGHLY-RESPECTED MAN.

HE HAS A VISION IN WHICH HE IS COMMANDED TO SEND A MESSENGER TO PETER, WHO IS STAYING IN THE CITY OF JOPPA, SOME 30 MILES FROM CAESAREA, WHERE CORNELIUS RESIDES.

MEANWHILE, PETER HAS A VISION IN WHICH HE SEES A SHEET FULL OF ANIMALS COMING DOWN FROM HEAVEN.

A VOICE COMMANDS PETER TO KILL AND EAT THESE ANIMALS, BUT HE REFUSES TO DO SO, SINCE THEY ARE UNCLEAN ACCORDING TO JEWISH LAW.

BUT THE VOICE RESPONDS TO PETER, "*WHAT GOD HAS MADE CLEAN, YOU MUST NOT CALL PROFANE.*"

WHEN THE MESSENGERS FROM CORNELIUS ARRIVE, PETER REALIZES THAT THE VISION IS NOT JUST ABOUT UNCLEAN FOOD – IT IS ABOUT UNCLEAN PEOPLE.

THE ISSUE IS – WHO CAN BE CONSIDERED PART OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD?

WE PICK THE STORY UP AS PETER ARRIVES AT THE HOME OF CORNELIUS.

WE'RE READING FROM THE 10TH CHAPTER OF ACTS – FROM VERSE 25 TO THE END OF THE CHAPTER.

ACTS 10:25-48.

(After scripture)

COINCIDENCE OR PROVIDENCE.

HOW OFTEN HAVE YOU WONDERED WHICH WAS MOST AT WORK IN A PARTICULAR EVENT OR MOMENT OF YOUR LIFE?

DID THINGS JUST TAKE PLACE BY HAPPENSTANCE?

OR WAS GOD AT WORK, BRINGING ABOUT A PARTICULAR ENCOUNTER IN YOUR LIFE?

IN THE PASSAGE WE'VE JUST READ, IT'S A NO-BRAINER, ISN'T IT?

QUITE CLEARLY THIS WAS NOT THE WORK OF EITHER CORNELIUS OR PETER.

WITHOUT QUESTION, THIS WAS THE MOVEMENT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE LIFE OF BOTH OF THESE MEN.

THEIR ROLE WAS SIMPLY TO BE OPEN TO THAT MOVEMENT OF GOD'S SPIRIT.

I WONDER HOW OFTEN WE MISS OUT ON THAT.

I WONDER HOW OFTEN GOD IS PLACING US IN A PARTICULAR SITUATION FOR THE EXPRESS PURPOSE OF MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE LIFE OF ANOTHER PERSON.

AND I WONDER HOW OFTEN WE'RE OBLIVIOUS TO IT.

THIS WAS A PIVOTAL MOMENT IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH.

PETER WAS BEING CALLED BY GOD TO DO SOMETHING THAT WENT AGAINST EVERYTHING HE BELIEVED WAS TRUE.

HE WAS BEING CALLED TO TELL HIS STORY TO A GENTILE – TO WELCOME SOMEONE FROM A DIFFERENT BACKGROUND, A DIFFERENT CULTURE, A DIFFERENT STANDING.

I THINK IT'S INTERESTING & NOT WITHOUT INTENTIONAL SIGNIFICANCE THAT PETER WAS STAYING IN THE CITY OF JOPPA.

DOES THAT NAME SOUND VAGUELY FAMILIAR?

THERE ARE ONLY 2 STORIES IN THE ENTIRE BIBLE THAT INVOLVE THE CITY OF JOPPA.

THERE'S THIS ONE & THEN THERE'S THE STORY OF JONAH.

HE WAS THE PROPHET WHO FLED TO JOPPA BECAUSE HE REFUSED TO OBEY GOD'S COMAND TO GO PREACH REPENTANCE TO A BUNCH OF NO-GOOD NON-JEWS IN A PLACE CALLED NINEVAH.

JOHAH BELIEVED THAT SALVATION WAS RESERVED FOR PEOPLE LIKE HIM.

HE DIDN'T WANT ANY PART OF A MOVEMENT THAT WOULD OPEN THE DOORS OF GOD'S LOVE TO OTHERS.

AND NOW, HUNDREDS OF YEARS LATER, PETER ENDS UP IN JOPPA & THE LESSON FOR HIM IS THE SAME AS IT WAS FOR JONAH.

GOD SHOWS NO PARTIALITY.

GOD'S LOVE IS OPEN TO ALL PEOPLE.

EVERYTHING GOD HAS DONE FROM THE CALL OF ABRAHAM TO THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS WAS AIMED AT EXTENDING DIVINE LOVE TO ALL PEOPLE.

OUR TASK AS FOLLOWERS OF JESUS CHRIST IS TO HELP THAT PROCESS ALONG, NOT HINDER IT BY PILING ON OUR OWN EXPECTATIONS & RULES & INDIVIDUAL & ULTIMATELY INSIGNIFICANT DEMANDS.

FOR MORE THAN 40 YEARS, WE IN THE MAINLINE CHURCHES HAVE AGONIZED OVER OUR PRECIPITOUS MEMBERSHIP DECLINE.

HUNDREDS OF STUDIES HAVE BEEN UNDERTAKEN & COUNTLESS THEORIES PROPOSED TO GET TO THE HEART OF THE PROBLEM.

I THINK IT'S NOW PRETTY CLEAR THAT IT'S NOT OUR WORSHIP STYLE.

IT'S NOT OUR SOCIAL OR POLITICAL LEANINGS.

IT'S NOT THE SONGS WE SING OR THE PROGRAMS WE PRESENT.

I HAVE ALWAYS MAINTAINED THAT OUR DECLINE IS DUE TO ONE SINGLE, OVERRIDING FACTOR – WE HAVE TURNED AWAY FROM EVANGELISM.

“PRESBYTERIAN EVANGELISM” – NOW THERE’S AN OXYMORON IF EVER THERE WAS ONE!
THE VERY WORD – “EVANGELISM” – IS ANATHEMA TO PRESBYTERIANS & THEREIN LIES THE PROBLEM.

WE CONNECT IT TO ALL SORTS OF UNSAVORY CHARACTERISTICS.
IN ESSENCE, THOUGH, WHAT WE’VE DONE IS THROWN THE BABY OUT WITH THE BATHWATER!
WE DON’T LIKE NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF CERTAIN STYLES OF EVANGELISM & HAVE, THEREFORE, REJECTED IT COMPLETELY.

PERHAPS THE GREATEST DEFINITION OFFERED OF EVANGELISM IS THAT OF D.T. NILES WHO SAID, “EVANGELISM IS ONE BEGGAR TELLING ANOTHER BEGGAR WHERE TO FIND BREAD.”

IT IS SIMPLY TELLING YOUR STORY.
IT’S TELLING SOMEONE THE DIFFERENCE THAT FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST & INVOLVEMENT WITH THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY HAS MADE IN YOUR LIFE.

IT INVOLVES BOTH LISTENING & SPEAKING.
NOTE WHAT PETER DOES IN THIS PASSAGE.
HE ENTERS THE HOUSE OF CORNELIUS & ASKS CORNELIUS TO TELL HIM WHY HE SENT FOR HIM.
HE WAS READY TO LISTEN.
ONCE CORNELIUS TELLS HIM HIS NEED, PETER TELLS HIM HIS STORY.
WHEN PETER ENTERED THAT HOUSE, THE CHURCH WAS FOREVER CHANGED.
SO, TOO, WITH YOU IN THOSE SITUATIONS TO WHICH GOD HAS CALLED YOU.
WHEN YOU ENTER A PERSON’S LIFE – READY TO TELL THEM YOUR STORY – NOTHING WILL EVER BE THE SAME AGAIN.

CAN YOU IMAGINE HAVING INFORMATION THAT MIGHT OF VALUE TO ANOTHER PERSON & NOT SHARING IT WITH THEM?

DO YOU REMEMBER THE MOVING STORY OF JESSE OWENS IN THE 1936 OLYMPIC GAMES IN BERLIN THAT TOOK PLACE UNDER THE EVIL GAZE OF ADOLF HITLER?
OWENS FOULED ON HIS FIRST TWO ATTEMPTS IN THE LONG JUMP.
THE TOP GERMAN LONG JUMPER LUZ LONG SUGGESTED OWENS PLAY IT SAFE AND JUMP A FEW INCHES BEFORE THE USUAL TAKE-OFF SPOT TO MAKE SURE HE WOULDN’T BE DISQUALIFIED.
OWENS TOOK HIS ADVICE AND QUALIFIED FOR THE FINALS, WHERE HE WON THE GOLD MEDAL,
LUZ LONG WAS THERE TO CONGRATULATE HIM.
OWENS WOULD LATER SAY “IT TOOK A LOT OF COURAGE FOR HIM TO BEFRIEND ME IN FRONT OF HITLER,”.

"YOU CAN MELT DOWN ALL THE MEDALS AND CUPS I HAVE AND THEY WOULDN'T BE A PLATING ON THE 24-KARAT FRIENDSHIP I FELT FOR LUZ LONG AT THAT MOMENT."

LUZ LONG HAD INFORMATION THAT OWENS NEEDED & HE COULDN'T IMAGINE NOT SHARING IT WITH HIM.

YOU HAVE SOMETHING TO SHARE WITH OTHERS.

IT'S THE STORY OF YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST & HIS CHURCH & WHAT IT MEANS IN YOUR LIFE.

SOMEHOW WE'VE GOTTEN THE MISTAKEN IDEA THAT EVERYONE WE KNOW IS ALREADY A PERSON OF FAITH.

THAT'S SIMPLY NOT TRUE.

THE PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE WITHOUT A FAITH BACKGROUND IS INCREASING AT A FRIGHTENING RATE.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO, ONLY 3% OF AMERICANS WERE GROWING UP WITH NO FAITH TRAINING.

THIRTY YEARS AGO THAT FIGURE HAD INCREASED TO NEARLY 15% AND TODAY IT IS APPROACHING TWICE THAT NUMBER.

IN OUR COMMUNITY, WITHIN 5 MILES OF EASTMINSTER, 1 OUT OF EVERY 3 INDIVIDUALS CLAIMS NO FAITH INVOLVEMENT.

JUST AS STARTLING, ANOTHER 1 OUT OF EVERY 3 INDIVIDUALS CLAIMS ONLY MODERATE FAITH INVOLVEMENT.

MODERATE FAITH INVOLVEMENT MEANS THAT ON RARE OCCASIONS THEY ATTEND WORSHIP SOMEWHERE.

THAT MEANS THAT 2 OUT OF EVERY 3 PEOPLE IN OUR COMMUNITY HAVE EITHER VERY MINIMAL OR NO FAITH INVOLVEMENT WHATSOEVER.

TODAY YOU HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO COMMIT YOURSELF TO SOMETHING THAT CAN LEAD TO A PIVOTAL MOMENT IN THE HISTORY OF THIS CONGREGATION & A PIVOTAL MOMENT IN THE LIFE OF ANOTHER PERSON.

IT CAN ALSO BE A PIVOTAL MOMENT IN YOUR OWN LIFE.

MY OWN PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF "UNBINDING YOUR HEART" HAS LED ME TO CONCLUDE THAT IT PROMISES TO DO THREE THINGS FOR YOU:

FIRST OF ALL, IT WILL ENABLE YOU TO STRENGTHEN YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD BY PROVIDING YOU WITH AN ENHANCED PRAYER LIFE IN A FASHION THAT YOU HAVE PERHAPS NEVER EXPERIENCED BEFORE.

SECONDLY, IT WILL ENABLE YOU TO STRENGTHEN YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER MEMBERS OF THIS CHURCH FAMILY BY GETTING TO KNOW ONE ANOTHER IN A NON-THREATENING, BUT VERY ENJOYABLE WAY.

FINALLY, IT WILL ENABLE YOU TO STRENGTHEN YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THOSE OUTSIDE OF THIS CHURCH FAMILY BY OPENING YOUR EYES TO THE MANY PROVIDENTIAL MOMENTS YOU EXPERIENCE EVERY DAY – THOSE TIMES THAT THE HOLY SPIRIT PRESENTS YOU WITH AN OPPORTUNITY TO TOUCH SOMEONE’S LIFE IN A VERY POSITIVE FASHION.

ROBERT FROST ONCE WROTE, "*SOMETHING THERE IS THAT DOESN'T LOVE A WALL.*"

THAT'S GOOD NEWS FOR US BECAUSE WE LIVE IN A WORLD OF WALLS.

DIVIDING WALLS ARE EVERYWHERE WE LOOK.

WE ERECT & THEN STAUNCHLY DEFEND THE WALLS THAT DIVIDE US FROM ONE ANOTHER.

THE WALLS THAT WE ERECT TAKE MANY FORMS.

SOME ARE RELATED TO OUR CULTURE & OUR WAY OF LIFE & OUR WAY OF EARNING A LIVING.

SOME ARE RELATED TO WHAT WE BELIEVE TO BE TRUE ABOUT GOD OR ABOUT JESUS.

WE ARE VERY PROFICIENT AT BUILDING WALLS & NOT VERY ADEPT AT TEARING THEM DOWN.

THE “UNBINDING YOUR HEART” EXPERIENCE JUST MAY TRANSFORM YOU FROM BEING A CONSTRUCTION SPECIALIST INTO A DEMOLITION EXPERT.

YOU MAY FIND THAT YOU’RE NO LONGER BUILDING WALLS TO KEEP PEOPLE AWAY FROM CHRIST, BUT TEARING THEM DOWN TO WELCOME THEM IN.

YOU MAY FIND THE EXPERIENCE TO BE A PIVOTAL MOMENT IN YOUR OWN LIFE, A PIVOTAL MOMENT IN THE LIFE OF THIS CHURCH FAMILY & A PIVOTAL MOMENT IN THE LIFE OF SOMEONE WHO DESPERATELY LONGS TO HEAR YOUR STORY. AMEN.

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