

A WORTHWHILE JOURNEY

Acts 10:23-48

Sermon for Peace Church

September 7, 2008

PURPOSE – To call people to walk the journey of cross-cultural relationship building (with Peter) in order to share the gospel and lead others into Spirit-filled living.

MAIN IDEA – The fruits of cross-cultural ministry are worth its challenges – when it is led by God and blessed by Him – for people are born of the Spirit.

I. INTRODUCTION

Let's open our Bibles to Acts 10:23 (p. 1709)

1. Good to have people gathered again after summer break. Trust you had a good summer. Perhaps some of you TRAVELLED on vacation. Our family did – out West – and it was wonderfully rewarding!
 - (i) As we continue our study of the ACTS of a Spirit-driven church, our Scripture reading today begins with the apostle Peter about to travel - starting out on a challenging, yet rewarding journey.

READ ACTS 10:23b-48

II. PETER'S JOURNEY

PETER'S JOURNEY – let's join his company! (We learn later that he brought 6 brothers along. I'm sure he has room for more – and sisters too.)

1. PHYSICALLY – the journey is not too difficult – 33 miles along the Mediterranean Coast – quite scenic! – from Joppa, where Peter had been staying with Simon the Tanner, north to Caesarea – the Roman military port where Cornelius, the centurion, his family and Italian Regiment were stationed.

- AND they take their time on this journey – do it in about a day and a half (the messengers sent from Cornelius to fetch Peter had done it in one day!).

2. CULTURALLY – however, this journey is very difficult!

- it's about going outside your comfort zone for the sake of God's will & gospel!

(i) Peter was culturally Jewish. Yes, he was a Christian – but he was a Jewish Christian – which meant, among other things, that he ate KOSHER.

= there were certain foods he did eat; others he didn't – stemming back to God's Old Covenant dietary laws in Leviticus 11 ... clean & unclean food – set them apart and reminded them of their calling to bring salvation to the world.

A. Those laws were fulfilled in Jesus, the CLEAN ONE - the MESSIAH who came from Israel. Of Him we must “eat” in order to be nourished in God's love and become clean & set apart for God spiritually. That is the NEW COVENANT.

The Old Covenant being fulfilled in Jesus, now any food is clean to eat. Jesus Himself taught that in Mark 7. Paul too picks this up in the teaching of his letters. Love matters. In Christ, Rom. 14, no food is unclean. (We covered this in last week's sermon.) What we eat, we do for the sake of loving God and neighbor. Love matters above lifestyle.

(ii) Peter, as an original disciple, would have begun to learn this teaching directly from Jesus – but nevertheless he still ate the way he had always eaten since a child (those lifestyle choices are embedded in us).

- More than that, however, it could well have been that the WAY he ate – considering some foods clean, others unclean – HELPED him in his new life IN JESUS.

For as he ate “clean” food now as a follower, he would think of Jesus – the CLEAN ONE, sent of God – and how he was CLEAN in him – set apart, distinct, born anew.

- So his eating lifestyle may well have become a practice whereby to bless Jesus and his life in Jesus

As Christians, we set up spiritual practices / disciplines / commitments to strength in our life in Jesus: Days to worship, times of prayer, fellowship meals, songs to sing.

(iii) The problem, however, was that Peter's EATING CHOICES had led him to be CUT OFF from other people. What you eat & don't eat can easily do that. You begin to disassociate from others – because of when & how & where you worship – or your other lifestyle choices with God.

I.e. – It’s a bit like the discipline & commitment we make in educating our children in private Christian schools – (something we’re convicted about because Jesus is Lord over education) – But we know how easily that can cut us off from others – public schools, neighbors, the community in which we live.

- A. Peter’s eating choices had cut him off from God’s greater purposes with the gospel. It had limited him in love.

Even though it was nothing wrong in itself (you can eat whatever you want!), his lifestyle choice limited him in loving others.

- B. This is the very thing that God had to overcome in Peter to continue him in gospel living. He did this by means of a vision we looked at last Sunday – a sheet holding all kinds of food – animals, reptiles, bird – which he was commanded to kill & eat.

“What? I don’ eat that!”, Peter responded. But eventually Peter realized that his eating lifestyle had put him in a box which, not only had isolated him from people God intended to know Jesus through Peter’s love, but had led him even to judge them – as unclean versus clean people! The matter went BEYOND FOOD & LIFESTYLE.

It’s not easy to confront these cultural styles & disciplines in order to grow in love – especially when those disciplines have nurtured our life in God.

I.e. – I remember being so impressed with Peace Church a few years ago (before I came to serve here) – when I drove by and saw that your morning worship sign indicated 10:30 a.m. worship. Wow! A Reformed ministry in South Holland changing a style / custom / discipline for the sake of better LOVING its community! That made a mark on me. It’s helped us now to set up a relationship with Kingdom Ministries.

- I think too of hearing a friend of mine, Elmer, share about how difficult it was for him to let go of more regular hymn-singing in his church’s ministry. Hymn-singing, like Peter’s food, nourished his life in Christ. It was his strong preference. But he added, “When I saw young people deeply engaged in praising God by different style; when I saw new people engaged – that JOY was worth it. For the sake of LOVE & gospel & having my friends’ grandchildren alive in church ... I let it go.”

(iv) LOVE MATTERS; PEOPLE MATTER; GOSPEL MATTERS; MISSION MATTERS; style & custom & structure only serve that.

3 times God showed that vision of the blanket full of clean & unclean food to Peter.
3 times he heard the voice: "Don't call anything impure that God has made clean."

It takes a lot to overcome those things. God is patient, yet persistent, as He works with us for the sake of the gospel.

3. Peter's journey is challenging CULTURALLY.

He has to bridge the HUGE ETHNIC divide between Jew & Gentile.

You can almost sense how uncomfortable he is in verse 28 when he gets to Cornelius' house and says: *"OK – you know it's against our law for a Jew to associate with Gentiles or visit them, but God has shown me that I shouldn't call any man as impure or unclean. SO I'M HERE! I've come with your messengers. Why did you send for me? ... LET'S GET DOWN TO IT!"*

= PETER TRAVELS & ARRIVES!

- (i) What is culturally the most DIFFERENT HOME you've ever been in? That's where Peter's gospel journey took him, as he begins relationship with Cornelius.
 - A. I remember eating in a Muslim home at the first South Holland Diversity dinner I went to – 2001, just weeks after 9/11. They were a beautiful couple – doctors. They put out an amazing spread of Middle-Eastern foods – culturally different.
 - B. I remember celebrating Passover with Jewish friends in their Flossmoor home a few years ago. The Supper our Lord fulfilled. A culturally different home.

Peter's journey took him to another home. That is so cool.

Did you know that very few African-Americans ever come into White homes? (and vice versa, even less?) I once read that. (That's one reason why I've asked our elders to be part of this year's Diversity Dinners.) I forget the exact statistic.

I too remember reading that in Ontario that 93% of first-generation immigrants had never been in the home of someone born in Ontario. That was a HUGE DIVIDE.

4. Peter's story reminds us that the gospel journey calls us to OVERCOME lifestyle choices when they isolate us from people, even cross-culturally.

Bill Hybels from WillowCreek church calls his evangelism training program: "JUST WALK ACROSS THE ROOM".

He got the title from the story of a Muslim friend who had met Jesus through someone who had taken Peter's journey. He writes ... PAGE 23 – QUOTE

5. Peter would say, “AMEN!” to that. Following God’s lead in this journey, he finds a group of people that God has PREPARED to hear what Peter has to share – and extraordinary outcomes result.

(i) Cornelius – noble, sincere, devout, humble – has drawn together a CROWD of relatives & close friends to listen to what Peter has to say. They’re hungry.

A. Jesus said, “The fields are RIPE unto harvest.”

- God has people prepared to hear the good news of his love in Jesus!
- When He inspires & leads us in the gospel journey, He too prepares the hearts of those WE WALK TO!

(ii) Peter asks, “Why have you sent for me?” – So Cornelius tells him of the angelic visitation that prompted his request.

Verse 33 – *“Now we’re all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.”*

(NOW THAT’S A CONGREGATION TO PREACH TO! ... Let’s join it – I’m sure there’s room in Cornelius’ home – find a seat, sit on the floor if you need to.)

III. CORNELIUS’ GOSPEL GIFT

1. For Peter starts by affirming that what he has to say is a word from God for you. God accepts men and women from every nation & walk of life.

2. This message, that God sent an angel to lead you to hear, is about JESUS – the Lord / Ruler / Creator of all (v. 36) – the ETERNAL SON incarnate – through whom God has shown how much He loves you. Through Him God offers PEACE.

The restlessness & emptiness in your life is an account of sin. Sin has alienated you from God. John the Baptist came to help us be honest with our failures before God. We’ve lacked courage in love; vision in love; passion in love – because we enjoy our comforts. We’re less than God intended us to be.

Your sin disappoints and angers God ... and yourself! It is a DIVIDE among us.

(i) But Jesus has come – a man who glowed in the Spirit (v. 38) true in love; holy in love – His light healed those around Him. It cast out the powers of the devil. It taught & lived truth.

A. But of all places, this light ended up SMASHED to BITS on a Cross.

Hanging on a tree, Jesus was cursed of God; alienated from Him. But that was Jesus' love for you and His God. He took on sin and God's just anger against it ... so that, being raised from the dead on the third day, His love redeems our lives. In Him, the curse of sin is removed. He has become a Savior.

= One through Whom we know forgiveness of sins & reconciliation with God

A. He is God's PEACE on earth.

B. He is God's LOVE for you.

C. He is the One God has now appointed as the Judge of the living & the dead (v. 42)

- Will you ACCEPT OR REJECT God's love?

3. What goes on in your heart when you hear that message?

Do those words WARM your heart? Do they fill your heart?

Do they make you want to shout: *HALLELUJAH! I believe! God loves me! ... He sent Jesus to bring PEACE between us ... Nothing can separate me from that love ... I am His and He is mine, forever & forever!!*

(i) That's EXACTLY what's going on in the heart of Cornelius and these Gentile believers.

Their receptivity reveals salvation.

As they listen and understand the message of Jesus, their hearts are overwhelmed by the love of God for them – and they BURST FORTH IN PRAISE!!!

A. Praise so overwhelming, they can't contain it. They interrupt Peter's preaching!!

B. Praise so great & overwhelming, they can't express it in their native language ... they speak in tongues / other languages / heavenly languages

4. The Holy Spirit has come upon them. = the Spirit of Praise!

The ETERNAL SPIRIT is always full of praise for the ETERNAL FATHER'S love for His people and the ETERNAL SON'S sacrifice to express that love.

- The Spirit's praise becomes their praise. They are anointed into the life of the Triune God.

5. The Holy Spirit comes upon Cornelius & his congregation as they listen to the message of Jesus in faith. Praise overwhelming is the sign of REBIRTH.

(i) One may or may not be led to express that praise in a foreign language. My observation is that it largely depends on the church culture you're in when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.

PRAISE, however – joyful, bounteous, exuberant PRAISE – is necessarily a sign of salvation.

A. YOUNG PEOPLE, you who've heard the message of Jesus for years & years, you know you're being saved when that message becomes the CENTRAL TREASURE of your heart – and you wake up in the morning and say: "Thank you Lord, you love me perfectly in Jesus Christ." ... When you look forward to Sundays as the QUEEN of all days because then you can come and praise God with others ... THEN you know you're being saved.

In that PRAISE, Peter and his company recognize salvation has come to Cornelius & his household (v. 47).

6. The gospel MESSAGE OF JESUS & ANOINTING OF THE SPIRIT bring this gift:

It turns life with God from DUTY TO DELIGHT!

- (i) As we saw last week, Cornelius was a good guy! He was devout & righteous. He gave generously to the poor. He prayed regularly – 3X / day. He led his whole family with integrity. He was respected. He was sincere – it wasn't show.
 - He was like a lot of us!

So what's the difference now that he's learned of Jesus and received the Spirit?

He found out how much God loved him – personally, graciously

... and his life with God became a DELIGHT in the JOY of the Spirit.

FROM DUTY TO DELIGHT – that's salvation

IV. CONCLUSION

TWO HUGE RHETORICAL QUESTIONS TO FINISH:

1. One, DO YOU HAVE THIS JOY IN THE SPIRIT?
2. Two, WAS PETER'S CULTURALLY CHALLENGING JOURNEY WORTH IT?

(1) If you're not sure you can say YES to the first question – but want to, BRING THAT condition before God in hunger & repentance.

- Repent of those things you know have become the CENTRAL TREASURE of your heart – the things you wake up thinking about that have replaced PRAISE as the core of your life ... may be things not too bad in themselves – but have become idolatrous
- In repentance is our salvation

Then ask & TRUST for the anointing of the Spirit in a fresh understanding of God's personal, gracious love in Jesus.

- The Spirit will come. The Father promises such to those who ask.

Don't settle for life with God built on CUSTOM & DUTY.

PRAISE alone is the sign of new birth!

(2) To the second question – “Was Peter's culturally challenging journey worth it?” – let me comment that it's SO HARD to say yes unless you know the anointing of the Spirit.

- Without that, you will naturally gravitate to lifestyle over love
- The customs that you have grown up with, especially religious stylings, will be too central to let go.

- So Question 1 does precede question # 2.

Peter was anointed by the Spirit at Pentecost and so he could hear & follow God - in order to walk the gospel journey in broader love.

Having done so, I know he'd want to say to us: IT'S WORTH IT! IT'S WORTH IT
Cornelius' joy in the Spirit is worth it all!

AMEN!