

“Growing Pains”

January 9, 2011

Text: *Isaiah 42:1-9, Acts 10:34-43*

I.

In this reading from Acts 10, in the earlier verses, two visions take place in two cities—with Cornelius, a Roman Centurion, in Caesarea and with Peter in Joppa—cities not far from Jerusalem. The point of these visions is the conversions they prompt—with Peter and with Cornelius and his family.

- Peter’s conversion is to a vision of the newly-forming Christian community that includes not just Jews, but Gentiles or, non-Jews, as well (in other words, everybody). Remember, Jesus and his disciples were all Jews.
- Meanwhile the conversion of Cornelius, a Gentile, leads to his whole family being baptized.

In the BIG PICTURE of things, there’s good news all around. But for Peter, this conversion no doubt took some time to take hold.

Before the time of Christ, Jews assumed that the fruit of the God of Moses and of the prophets was for Jews only. For them, the Gentiles were outsiders and were not the beneficiaries of what God had revealed to them.

In other words, theirs was an *in group/ out group* world. You were either *in*, as were the Jews; or you were *out*, as were all Gentiles.

In this sense, there were certain constraints on their lives, prescribed boundaries within which they lived. Again, it was very much an *in group/ out group* world.

Therefore, initially, the followers of Jesus, who were all Jews, thought God’s message of salvation—the saving grace that came into the world through Jesus’ acts of love and compassion, through his suffering and his death on the cross—was only for them.

As a Jew, this is exactly what Peter thought, and we can’t blame him for that. This was the world he was born into. There were built-in constraints and limitations.

II.

We have to remember that Luke is the author of both Acts (the Acts of the Apostles) and the gospel of Luke. In Luke’s gospel, early on, after Jesus’ birth, the devout, old man, Simeon—who’d been led by the spirit to behold the new-born Messiah with his own eyes—upon seeing Jesus, takes him in his arms and says,

...for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.

Luke, here, is building on the prophecy of Second Isaiah, from our reading this morning from Isaiah 42, one of the *servant songs* where Israel is the servant ... and where God says about Israel ...

*I have put my spirit upon you ... to bring forth justice to the nations.
I have called you in righteousness ... I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations.*

You see, Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55), like Luke, is a universalist.

In religion, a universalist believes that the fruits of their religion—the salient and good points of their faith—are for all people. All people are welcome to respond to what God calls us to in Christ. This is not meant to suggest that Christ is the only way to God, but rather that God’s salvation is for everyone. In other words, anyone can respond to the call.

This is a good thing. In our church, we like to think of ourselves as *progressive* Christians; this is a progressive way to understand our Christian faith.

Universalists, in this sense, see the BIG PICTURE of our faith. They see the end, the goal, the trajectory towards which the spirit of faith is moving.

And the reaches of that trajectory are radically inclusive. No one is excluded. No one is not invited. The invitation sounds out to the ends of the earth:

No matter who you are or where you are in your life journey, you are welcome here.

(In our worship, we say this every week as part of our welcome ... and we mean it.)

The best of Jesus, the best of the Bible and the best of Christianity send this message to the world.

III.

In Acts 10, clearly, Luke—as a universalist—is paving the way for the Apostle Paul’s evangelistic activity to the Gentiles. Still, from Peter’s point of view, all of this is new ... and it signals a radical departure from anything he has known.

As a good Jew, it was unlawful for him to associate with a Gentile. It was unlawful for him to eat anything that is *profane or unclean*. It took *visions* and the *power of the Spirit* to move him to go and see Cornelius.

And therefore, in Peter's speech to Cornelius and his family, when he starts out saying, *I truly understand that God shows no partiality*, this is a BIG DEAL, a significant breakthrough for Peter.

Growing pains? You better believe it! Huge growing pains.

This could not have been easy for Peter. And nor is it easy for us.

1. accepting that new person into the family ... or, into the neighborhood or into the church.
2. accepting that our vision of faith is not the only vision and that Jesus of Nazareth is not the only way to God ...
3. accepting, at times, that the ways of our ancestors were often wrong—with regard to matters of race, gender equality, sexual orientation.

Sometimes, the work we have to do as people of faith is to rise above the short-sighted ways of our past. I could be our parents ... or grandparents ... or the neighborhood we grew up in ... or the church of our youth.

IV.

Growing pains ... The world is always evolving, and we along with it; each of us, growing and becoming a bigger person with a larger view of the world. But this isn't something that comes naturally to us. We have to work at it.

Our natural tendency as human beings is to group ourselves together and then separate ourselves from others. *We identify and separate.*

1. It may be by the food we eat ... some people can't stand being in the presence of certain foods, meats mostly ... *we identify and separate.*
2. or it may be the way we view race relations. Years ago and, no doubt, still, in some places today, you see some strange reactions to couples who are mixed race. Again, *we identify and separate.*
3. or it may be our views on education or health care ... or the role of guns in our community life ...
4. or the way we view the role of government ... or the way we vote. No doubt, we all know people in one political party who don't want to hang around with people in the other party.

We identify and separate ... identify and separate ... identify and separate.

At some point, the question comes down to, how big of a world do we want to live in?

In a world where all people are welcome, a world where all cultures and religions have value? Or in a world where only people like us are accepted?

But keep in mind, there are enormous consequences in how we answer these questions. Small worlds—where everybody is like us and if they're not like us, we convert them or throw them out—are forever going to war to make sure their world stays small.

To make sure everybody else signs up for their form of government, or their economic system ... or their religious faith. The Taliban is like this; Al Qaeda is like this.

The **growing pains** we all go through in the process of welcoming and embracing individuals and cultures who are different from us is one of the major testing grounds we human beings are challenged with every day.

V.

There was probably part of Peter that was, initially, uneasy about this vision he had received. It's not easy to change, and certainly not, right away. The sort of change that involves accepting new people as *equal to us* or *part of us*, in any sense, takes time.

In that sense, we celebrate the recently passed legislation with regard to ***don't ask/ don't tell***. But such change, much like the Civil Rights movement of the 50's and 60's, and giving *the vote* to women in the twenties, doesn't happen over night.

The spirit of God unveiled in the Bible, friends, is always nudging us towards a BIGGER WORLD, a world that welcomes and seeks common ground with more people, a world willfully open to new ideas, new ways of thinking, and new ways of being the people of God.

In our church, we are always being challenged to grow. In our search for a new Music Director, we don't know where our search will take us. Although we're pretty much on the same page as a congregation on this, still, we have strong views on music.

And today, after worship, we'll be voting on and hopefully adopting a proposed By-laws revision for our church. This is a common practice that churches go through, often times about every decade or so.

Why? Because churches—like people, like cultures and civilizations—are always evolving, adapting and adjusting to the changes that swirl around us. That's our human situation—trying to adapt to the changing times that are all about us.

Growing pains.

VI.

But **growing pains** are a good thing. After all, we're not stones. We're human beings, created in the image of God. As God said to the Israelites in Exile, seeking to lift their spirit, God says also to us:

*I am the Lord, I have called you to righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations.*

I am the Lord, that is my name.

Just as Peter, a Jew, and Cornelius, a Gentile, are in a very real sense, a *light* to each other in God's calling to us in Christ, we too, as believers, are **a light to the world**.

When we are truly a light to the world, friends, we do not know how, and in what ways, God is going to use us. And we don't need to know. All we need is to trust God and to open ourselves to the Spirit. For sure, there will be **growing pains** along the way. But, again, that's a good thing and a blessing to both us and to the world.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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