

Acts 10 – Peter, a sheet and a vision

DON'T CALL UNCLEAN WHAT GOD HAS CREATED CLEAN

Picture a lake, (without ice) – on a calm still summer morning. It's daybreak...the sun is just coming up.
The lake is like glass
no wind, no waves, it's perfectly mirroring the trees and sky...

and suddenly
one single rock
plop
right in the middle.

And picture the ripples as they extend out from that centre
perfectly circular,
rippling out and out and out some more.

That's kind of what the book of Acts is like.

The one single plop in the lake is Jesus; his life, his death and his resurrection
plop.

And the rest of the story is the ripples. Resurrection ripples
the circle widens and widens and widens yet again

as the infant church lives into its identity as the community of the resurrection
as those who will carry on and embody the life that Jesus hallowed and preached and loved and gave
up.

And it's fascinating – exciting and sometimes disturbing to watch them figure it out. It must have been
wild in the early church – they had no rules they had no manual, no new testament
they were on their own
to figure it out. It must have been wild.

Question after question to figure out. Just when they thought they had one thing dealt with
BAM another question, another issue, another argument....
I love reading this stuff.

Today we're reading about one of those resurrection ripples
but let me bring you up to date to how we got here.

You know, right, that the book of Acts was written by – Luke
his sequel.

It's the story of the infant church, as it picks itself up, well more like is picked up by the Spirit, dusted
off, and set on its feet – the Spirit saying “you can DO this”

After Jesus' resurrection they were scared and confused and tempted to just go back to how things were
before they met him. In John you find Peter, looking around, saying “I'm going fishing”. Back to what
he knew. Back to how it used to be.

And of course, it's precisely there that the risen Jesus meets him, and says “do you love me? Then feed
my sheep”

ANYWAY, they were tempted to go back to the way things were. That's what we do when we're scared

or frustrated or confused.

But then....Acts 2 describes how the Holy Spirit came upon them with wind and fire and they were filled with what it took to really really be the church. And so they start.

And right away – questions. It's fine to say we want to be the church; embody the love and justice and radical welcome and acceptance that Jesus had called them to. But what does that mean really? Like – what are you going to do after breakfast? What does it mean in practical every day ways?

Well the first question was – is this good news only for some people? If so who?

Who is included?

So the ripples begin to extend.

There is a small cluster of lines from scripture that give me goosebumps. I'm going to tell you about three of them including the one from today.

The first: Philip is going through Samaria (interesting in itself; in chapter 7 Stephen had become the first one to die for preaching about Jesus and they scattered; got out of town – Philip goes to Samaria, enemy territory. Samaritans and Jews despised one another. Anyway, he's there and along comes a man from Ethiopia – a eunuch. He's been to Jerusalem, is interested in learning about God, and is reading the book of Isaiah. He asks Philip to explain a passage to him and Philip does. Now: he was likely black, he was not a Jew and he was a eunuch. A eunuch is a man who has been castrated, often we're told they were castrated and then enslaved to guard the harems. Deuteronomy says clearly “a eunuch shall not inherit the kingdom of heaven” - no question about that the Bible said he was not welcome. By race, by ethnicity, by religion and by sexuality this man is not acceptable in that culture.

He listens to Philip talk about Jesus. He is convinced, and when they get to some water the eunuch says:

“look here is some water. *HERE'S THE GOOSPBUMP PART* **“Is there anything to prevent me from being baptized?”**”

What's Philip going to do? The answer is yes. Yes there IS something to prevent you from it. The Bible.

Philip gets down out of the carriage and baptizes him.

He doesn't say I have to consult my colleagues, hold a conference on the role of scripture in the changing world, he baptizes the man.

I don't know about you but I find that amazing.

And the circle is drawn wider
and another fence post falls.

Then

in the next chapter, we read about this two weeks ago, but let me tell you again.

Saul, who was persecuting the new Christians, there when Stephen was killed has a vision on the road to Damascus. A voice, identified as the risen Christ, calls to him, and he is struck blind, taken by the hand into the city. A man named Ananias receives a vision, where God tells him to go to the place where Saul is staying, because God has chosen him (Saul) to be God's messenger.

Ananias is understandably hesitant – this is the man with a reputation of capturing, imprisoning, killing, Christians. Ananias almost certainly knew people personally who had been harmed or killed by SaulAnd now he's being asked to go to him? Help him? He protests, God insists.....
and in an act of trust that blows me away
in an act of faith that people can change, that forgiveness is real
and that human beings can overcome even the most crippling things that divide us
he goes to the house where Saul has been led, still blind....
in spite of his personal fears and feelings
in spite of the fact that it could all be a trap
and likely in spite of what his friends and family are telling him “are you crazy????”
he goes up to him and says

“Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus has sent me to you”

And only then do the scales fall from Saul's eyes
only then does he rise to become Paul, who will change the face of Christianity
only then does the miracle happen.
That's the real miracle of that story. Not so much the vision on the road to Damascus
but the faith of Ananias who had what it took to look into the face of an enemy and call him brother

and another resurrection ripple draws the circle wider. Wider, to include those who have done us
grievous harm and who are freed with a second chance and new life

That's the second line.

“is there anything to prevent me from being baptized?”

“Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus sent me to you”

and the third is from today's reading.

READ IT

A strange vision but isn't that a great line?

“don't call unclean what God has created clean”

Peter doesn't really understand the vision right away, but before he's had time to think about it, he's still
pondering, it says, it's made clear.

READ THE REST

Cornelius, part of the Roman army. Israel is occupied by Rome, they are hated, resisted, despised.
The oppressor. Is the Gospel for him too?

And the circle widens one more time.

It seems to me that the Spirit is still doing this to the church. Every time we think we have it all figured
out, every time we're tempted to congratulate ourselves on how open we are, how inclusive, how
tolerant, (now there's a patronizing word eh? “Tolerant”) -

every time we think we have it all together
the Spirit goes
“here, what are you going to do with this?”
The Holy Spirit is up to holy mischief that way all the time.

Do you see the Spirit's work among us like that? What new thing is the Spirit asking us to consider?
That would be a great discussion – a great one.

One final thing: It's an observation, a warning and a promise.

Peter goes up on the roof to pray. He sees a vision. Powerful and disturbing.
It does not end there. Encountering the Holy; a life of deep prayer, visions, study – however you get in touch with God
is not an end in itself. I know there are those who would challenge that and say that the chief end of human life is to know God and glorify God
I think that Scripture attests otherwise.
Our visions, our prayers, our getting in touch with God are FOR SOMETHING.

Preparing us for action.

Peter had this vision SO THAT he would be ready when he was asked to go to Cornelius' home. So that he had the spiritual backing, as it were, to understand the issues and do what he had to do.

It serves only the powerful and the status quo if our worship life takes all our time and energy and we think that's an end in itself. The principalities and powers laugh up their sleeves when we study the Bible or pray and that's it. They have us right where they want us then. Prayer and study and an encounter with God is so that we can do the work of the Spirit in the world. For Peter it was understanding that “with God there is no partiality but includes people of every nation – of every kind. We must not call unclean what God has created clean” that is a political manifesto for people and for the earth.

I was leading worship at the meeting in Toronto this week and used this reading and simply asked what people's vision was and what it was preparing them for. One woman, the Sask. Rep. Said that this reading at that moment renewed her vision and resolve to go back to the environmental work she's been doing. She had come to our meeting discouraged and thinking she might give up a particular thing she's been working on. But she said that this – this reading has empowered her to go back, because for her, she is calling to account those who consider the natural resources of the earth “unclean” if you will – something to be used, discarded, at human whim. She packed to go home saying “don't call unclean what God has created clean”

I'm thinking of this as we prepare for the AGM and for our job fair next Sunday. We are looking for folks to serve on committees of this church. And we need them. BUT what churches sometimes do, and God forgive us if we do that, is take up all your time so that you don't have time for the other work in the world that you are called to. Do not let us do that. (YOU MIGHT NOT WANT TO LET THE NOM. COM KNOW I SAID THIS!) My goal, my prayer, my intent, is that what we do here in worship and in the life of our church
is like your rooftop
and you get your vision, you get fed, you do good work to equip yourself and others
SO THAT we can all go into the world
as resurrection ripples

widening the circle of God's love
in practical, personal, systematic and political ways.

May this be a rooftop for you.
May you hear the words

“is there anything to prevent me from being baptized” and respond with a radical risky SPLOOSH as
the water is poured over waiting foreheads.

May you hear the words

“Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus sent me to you”

and respond in acts of brave forgiveness that frees you and others for resurrection life

and may you hear the words

“do not call unclean what I have created clean”

and respond

with lives of service and action

fit for the kingdom we are called to.

And all the people said

AMEN!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!