

“Overcoming Fears and Extending Boundaries”

Acts 10:44-48

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We live in a time of much fear about many things. It is not just violence people fear, whether it takes the form of terrorism or homegrown gun violence. It is the pace of change that brings not only new technology into our lives every day (my iPhone is out of date, like me...), but new people from different parts of the world who speak different languages and have different beliefs about God and the world.

In the year 1970 Alvin and Heidi Toffler published a book entitled *Future Shock* which described a psychological condition which affects individuals and society as a whole when we perceive that we are experiencing too much change in too short a time. If we experienced this in 1970, and most would agree we did, we are experiencing it now.

We can speak in general terms of the increasing diversity and religious pluralism in the U.S. unsettling us, but the most succinct way to describe these realities is with a few statistics. By the year 2044 there will be no single racial or ethnic group that will make up the majority in this land. In fact, by the year 2020, non-whites will become the majority of the nation's children. And there are now more Muslims in the U.S. than Episcopalians or members of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

I am not judging these realities one way or another. I am simply saying that they are creating future shock and thus causing people to feel anxious and unsettled. And all of this is understandable. The added reality, though, is what many are doing with their anxiety is developing negative attitudes toward people who are different and this raises serious concerns for the character of our nation and even greater concerns for the church since Christians have been a part of this response and it is difficult to imagine anything more contrary to Jesus' teachings.

I am not talking here about the response of politicians to this dynamic. I am talking about a hostile attitude that has infected the character of national life. We can debate policies until the cows come home, be they American Cows or Highland Coos, but there is no debate about the fact that Christians are called to love our neighbor, to welcome the stranger, to build bridges with people who are different and to include all people in our witness. This attitude which demeans immigrants, Muslims and others flies in the face of our calling!

But the church has faced challenges like this before, and in God's grace, we have always found a way back onto the right path. We have always found a way to overcome our fears, deepen our understanding and adapt to a changing world. We have always found a way to allow God's Spirit to empower us to extend the boundaries of the covenant community. There are many places in church history to which we might look for guidance, but today we consider our reading from Acts 10 and the larger story which surrounds it. For this is a story about the early church experiencing future shock and somehow overcoming it.

We know this story. Peter is teaching and preaching about Jesus and healing the sick, but he is doing all of this among the Jewish people only. After all, Jesus said he had come for the lost sheep of the house of Israel, that it was not right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs, the Gentiles. Peter is following the command to make disciples, but he is making disciples of Jewish people only and this is what he will continue to do unless something dramatic happens to change his mind.

Of course, something dramatic happens. Peter has a vision in which he is asked to eat all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds. Peter refuses to eat these things, saying they are unclean and profane, but a voice says, "What God has called clean, you must not call profane." Peter struggles to understand the vision, though it occurs three times, until a request comes from a Centurion named Cornelius in Caesarea, a Gentile, and then, Peter understands.

The vision is not really about food, it is about people, and what God is telling him is that it is not right for him to call unworthy those whom God calls worthy. The Good News is not just for Jewish people. It is for all people. So, Peter goes to see Cornelius, acknowledges that it is against Jewish law to associate with Gentiles, but goes on to say that a new law is being established through Jesus Christ wherein God shows no partiality to anyone, but accepts all who respond to the Good News.

Peter preaches about Jesus' ministry of doing good and healing, his death on a cross and resurrection, and he seems to have a lot more sermon left in him, but before he can say more, there is an outpouring of the Spirit on all who hear. The circumcised believers, the Jewish-Christians who have come with Peter, are astounded that the Spirit is poured out *even* on Gentiles, but it happens in a way they cannot dispute. There is speaking in tongues, as on Pentecost, there is praising of God, and so, no one can argue when Peter says there is nothing to prevent the baptism of these new believers. The Good News of Jesus is for all!

So, what we see in this story is the early church overcoming its fear of those who are different in a way that allows the boundaries of the covenant community to be extended. In the process, we find hope for our current situation as well as insight as to how we might move in the direction of faithful discipleship.

Hope is found in Peter's experience which tells us that stubborn people sometimes experience a change of heart. Perhaps it doesn't sound very flattering to say that Peter is stubborn. We might want to say that he is spirited, he has strong convictions. And Peter is all of these things. He has strong convictions and it is out of religious belief that he avoids Gentiles and thus excludes them from his witness. He is convinced that this is what God wants. He just happens to be wrong.

But he does change his heart and mind and thus, there is hope for us here - "us" as a nation, "us" as a church and "us" as individuals. We have a tendency to think that if someone needs to change, it is someone

else, but stubbornness plagues us all at some point and none of us understands all of God's vision for the beloved community, which means we all have areas in which we need to expand our understanding.

I think of a man in another setting who at first opposed the church's efforts to embrace the work of integration in the 1960's, but had a change of heart. What heightened the church's anxiety was that the pastor's wife, who worked with the youth, invited the youth minister from an African-American church to speak to the church's youth. That was bad enough, but he brought his youth with him, which was worse, and then, God forbid, the two groups went swimming together!

So, this man spoke at a church conference where debate was raging. He acknowledged his racist feelings and noted that others shared his perspective, but then he said he never felt like these feelings were pleasing to his Lord. "Our pastor and his wife are only trying to help our young people and all of us to find out how Jesus wants us to act in all this change which is coming to us," he said, "Let's just pray for them and try to help as we try to find out what the Lord wants us to do about all this (*The Spirit of Jesus*, p. 162, Jack Noffsinger)."

That man had a change of heart which not only enabled him to overcome his fear and be willing to reach out to people he had previously avoided; it empowered him to help others to do so. We need more of that spirit in this time because there are still people we struggle to embrace as fully human, people we tend to neglect in our efforts to love our neighbor – immigrants and refugees, people who look like they might be Muslim, LGBT people and others.

But it's not just that we need a change of heart, it's that we need the Spirit to change our heart. If we pay attention to Peter's experience, we see that he does not change on his own. The Spirit is at work in his visions and in the life of Cornelius. And by the time we join the story today, the Spirit is working overtime, falling on all who hear Peter and moving them to experience salvation. Peter does not do all of this alone. The Spirit guides and empowers him every step of the way.

Such will be the case with any change that enables people to overcome their fears and extend the boundaries of the covenant community. I think of many stories connected to the Wyatts' work with immigrants and refugees in the Triangle – the way a Swahili-speaking church has begun with Congolese refugees and now serves over a hundred people, the way the Crabtree Valley Baptist Church on Lead Mine decided to allow its former youth building to become a Welcome House, the way so many volunteers who never saw themselves serving “those people” have come to put a human face on God's love. This stuff doesn't happen by human effort alone. It only happens when the Spirit of God is at work and people cooperate with the Spirit.

And the reason why this is so critical is that there are all sorts of people outside the church who not only need our love and compassion, but who are open to the Gospel. In the reading from Acts, Cornelius is described as God-fearing man who responds to his own vision and sends for Peter. He is an outsider to established faith, yet he is already in touch with God. He witnesses to Peter just as much as Peter witnesses to him. But he is open to the Good News, as others are, and as a result, he and they respond to the Gospel and the Spirit is poured out on them.

There are people all around us who are open to the Gospel too. They may not be connected to any institutional church. In fact, they may be suspicious of the church. But they may already be in touch with God. We have a calling to include them in our witness and ministry, but we cannot do that until our hearts are open to them, until we realize that no one has a right to call unworthy what God has called worthy.

I remember a church in another city which welcomed an oddball teenager who wasn't like anyone in the church. He hadn't grown up in church. So, he didn't look, think or act like anyone else. His hair was too long, he didn't have a coat and tie and he asked too many questions. But he was there because he was hungry for love and meaning, he was hungry for what the Gospel had to offer. And because this particular

church, or at least some of its members, realized this, they accepted him as he was, welcomed him into the community and eventually confirmed with baptism the work that the Spirit had begun in his life.

By now, some of you have figured out that the oddball teenager was me and you have been given a glimpse of why this subject stirs such passion for me. This matter of extending boundaries is not an esoteric matter for wild-eyed liberals to banter about glibly and Bible-thumping conservatives to oppose. It is a central Gospel truth which has changed my life and will change the lives of others. It is not an easy path in this time when many are filled with fear of the other. We are swimming upstream. And yet, we are also addressing a deep hunger and we are proving faithful to our calling.