

Sermon Notes for 4/24/16 (Easter 5)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Acts 11:1-18

Theme: DON'T STAND IN THE WAY OF GOD'S SALVATION!

The Point: The Spirit works to remove barriers to the proclamation and to the reception of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Introduction: Communication is not easy. Ask any student and teacher or principal. Ask any parent and teenager. Ask any husband and wife. I know it is true in our house, that often what we try to communicate to one another is not what is received. And this is not true only in households, but in businesses and non-profits and government agencies as well.

J. Edgar Hoover ran the FBI, no question about it. As a result, almost all of his subordinates were on the lookout for ways to impress their powerful boss. A young FBI man was put in charge of the FBI's supply department. In an effort to cut some costs and impress his boss, he reduced the size of the office memo paper. One of the new memo sheets soon ended up on Hoover's desk. Hoover took one look at it, determined he didn't like the size of the margins on the paper, and quickly scribbled on the memo, "Watch the borders!" The memo was passed on through the office. For the next six weeks, it was extremely difficult to enter the United States by road from either Mexico or Canada. Why? Because the FBI was watching the borders. Why was the FBI watching the borders? They thought they had received a warning from their chief. But they hadn't. They had transformed an innocuous comment into a solemn warning. (Steve Farrar, *Family Survival in the American Jungle*, 1991, Multnomah Press, p. 75)

Communication is tough. Ask Peter or Cornelius about that. The Good News is the communication that needs to be spoken to everyone, for it addresses every person's eternal destiny. But what about the barriers that get in the way of that proclamation? One of those barriers in Peter's day was the distinction between Jew and Gentile. Jews wanted nothing to do with Gentiles, and this cultural bias needed to die a quick death. Otherwise, the church would turn out to be just an isolated Jewish cult. God was determined that this would not happen – and that Peter would be one of the agents to keep this from happening.

Peter was called before the bar by the circumcised believers in Judea. They had gotten word that certain Gentiles had received God's Word. But they were not happy about how this happened. Peter was being called on the carpet, and he knew it. They called and asked Peter, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" It was bad enough that Peter had gone to the home of Cornelius in the city of Caesarea. But even worse, as they considered it, he had dilly-dallied around and eaten with them. Table fellowship was tantamount to full community. When Peter ate with Gentiles, it was the beginning of the end for the Jewish laws pertaining to unclean foods. God's communication about this came with some interesting twists.

Peter was convinced that this serious adjustment came at the impetus of the Holy Spirit, and was not just an off-the-cuff reaction of this hot-blooded disciple. After considering how to communicate this to the Jerusalem church, Peter decided to tell his story. He related his experience in Joppa to the believers. While engaged in prayer there, he had seen the vision of a large sheet being let down from heaven by its corners. As it approached Peter, he could see that it contained "four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air," most of which would have been forbidden to eat under strict Jewish laws. And even if there were some clean animals in the bunch, they would have been contaminated by their contact with the unclean ones. A voice came from heaven: "Get up, Peter, kill and eat," it said. Peter protested that he had never allowed anything unclean into his mouth. But the voice rebuked him with the words, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This occurrence with the sheet and the voice happened three

times, so that Peter could not mistake what he was hearing. God did not want this communication to be misunderstood in any way.

When, at that very moment, three men from Cornelius showed up at the home where Peter was, the Spirit told Peter “to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.” This was radical, transformational stuff! The distinction between Jew and Gentile was so basic to the upbringing of every Jewish boy and girl, it was as much second-nature to them as it is for us to believe in the germ theory of illness. The same could be said about the food restrictions. No doubt the Jews felt these were equally justified – and unchangeable, since they had been handed down by Moses. But God was bringing a new view of reality to these devout Jewish believers.

That new reality would hearken back to the communication of Moses in Deuteronomy: “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.” This prophet “like Moses” would claim authority even over the Mosaic teachings, especially those related to food and drink and new moons and Sabbath – and even the distinction between Jew and Gentile. No distinction would be drawn between Jew and Gentile when it came to the door to salvation. God’s love and grace were to be communicated across all racial and ethnic and social boundaries. Peter had an open door to preach the Good News, as Cornelius had testified when Peter visited him, “So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.” What preacher wouldn’t love to drive a Mack truck through that opening?!

God Himself had authorized this communication to the non-Jewish audience in front of Peter. And their response to the Gospel is fruitful and immediate. Peter even points out, “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning.” Apparently they demonstrated the Spirit’s presence – whether through speaking in tongues or whatever it might have been, we are not told. But neither Peter nor those who had come with him could deny that the Spirit was operating here. Cornelius and his household received baptism and were welcomed into the church as full-fledged members of the body of Christ.

Peter was absolutely convinced that this new teaching had come directly from Jesus Himself. He remembered the words of Jesus (that we hear in today’s Gospel), “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” Peter believed that here the Spirit of Truth had given clear and unmistakable direction to His people about the direction their mission and ministry needed to take. (And Peter was the Apostle to the Jews, as Paul was the Apostle to the Gentiles. Yet here it took this radical experience of the Apostle to the Jews to open the door to the Gentiles. Amazing, isn’t it?)

In his autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi wrote that during his student days he read the Gospels seriously and considered converting to Christianity. He believed that in the teachings of Jesus he could find the solution to the caste system that was dividing the people of India. So one Sunday he decided to attend services at a nearby church and talk to the minister about becoming a Christian. When he entered the sanctuary, however, the usher refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go worship with his own people. Gandhi left the church and never returned. “If Christians have caste differences also,” he said, “I might as well remain a Hindu.” That usher’s prejudice not only betrayed Jesus but also turned a person away from trusting Him as Savior. (*Our Daily Bread*, March 6, 1994) What might have been different in our world, had Gandhi found a welcome embrace among Christ’s people and had embraced Christ himself?

Communication is hard, especially when we have language and cultural barriers to deal with. Prudence

Leith, chef and caterer, says, “My favorite catering disaster is the true story of the couple who went to the Far East on holiday. They wanted, besides their own supper, something to give their poodle. Pointing to the dog, they made international eating signs. The waiter nodded understandingly, picked up the poodle, and set off for the kitchen – only to return half an hour later with the roasted poodle on a platter.” (Prudence Leith, *Pardon Me, But You're Eating My Doily*) We who have been entrusted with the Good News of Jesus’ victory over sin and death and His forgiveness for all need to communicate it clearly.

The caution that God’s Word issues to us today is this: “Don’t stand in the way of God’s salvation!” Don’t be a party to closing the door of salvation to anyone, regardless of their social standing, reputation, character, language, culture, or any other human barrier.

This means going the extra mile in welcoming other people in their status as people for whom Christ has given His life. It means willingness to put our prejudices and biases off the front of the stage as we meet and relate to others. It means being more concerned about relationships than about our cultural rules and expectations. It also involves being more concerned about how God is moving in a person’s life than about what I think about that person’s “save-ability.”

Catherine Booth was known as the “mother” of the Salvation Army. “Wherever Catherine Booth went,” said Campbell Morgan, “humanity went to hear her. Princes and peeresses merged with paupers and prostitutes.” One night, Morgan shared in a meeting with Mrs. Booth; and a great crowd of “publicans and sinners” was there. Her message led many to Christ. After the meeting, Morgan and Mrs. Booth went to be entertained at a fine home; and the lady of the manor said, “My dear Mrs. Booth, that meeting was dreadful.” “What do you mean, dearie?” asked Mrs. Booth. “Oh, when you were speaking, I was looking at those people opposite to me. Their faces were so terrible, many of them. I don't think I shall sleep tonight!” “Why, dearie, don't you know them?” Mrs. Booth asked; and the hostess replied, “Certainly not!” “Well, that is interesting,” Mrs. Booth said. “I did not bring them with me from London; they are your neighbors!” Who are our neighbors? Are they those from whom we would shrink in fright or horror or shame? How will we present ourselves to our Lord, if we turn from Him those whom He would love through us?

Conclusion: The Spirit works to remove barriers to the proclamation and to the reception of the Good News of Jesus Christ. He does that in our lives through His movement in the Gospel of God’s love and forgiveness in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. He does it through His movement within the hearts and lives of His people as they expand their reach to those who might once have been considered unreachable or even untouchable. He moved in the life of Peter to remove the barrier between Jew and Gentile for the sake of the Church in every generation. May we know the movement of that same Spirit as we feed on Christ’s body and blood, renewing and refreshing our lives to be agents of His peace wherever we go! In the strong name of Jesus, AMEN!