

AN INCONVENIENT FAITH
Acts 10:1-17, 21-24; 34-36; 44-48
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, May 13, 2012

Today I want us all to consider the ramifications of having an inconvenient faith. But first, let's talk about what it means to have a convenient faith.

A convenient faith guarantees mediocrity since it reaffirms your preconceived notions about God and Christianity. A convenient faith says "you're OK just the way you are" which then excuses you from the gut wrenching, soul searching necessary for true repentance and conversion. There's no expectation of risk taking or self-sacrifice, no obligation to be your brother's keeper. What's more your religious beliefs and traditions never need be challenged.

Give me that old time religion...
It was good enough for Grandpa
It's good enough for me.

But what if Grandpa's religion was off the rails, shallow and legalistic? What if that old time religion reinforces your prejudices by promoting a gospel of conditional love, conveniently excluding anyone who doesn't look, think, or act like you?

Wasn't this the brand of religion Jesus sought to debunk?

Case in point: Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan was meant to break the religious people free from a faith system that conveniently endorsed their racial prejudices. After the hapless traveler was robbed and left bloodied on the roadside, a priest and then a Levite passed him by. Then, when a lowlife Samaritan was introduced, Jesus' listener's ears probably perked up as they expected to hear Jesus make him out to be the real villain of the story. To their surprise the Samaritan turned out to be the only good neighbor in the picture.

This parable reminds me of the story about the small Baptist congregation that sent out a call for help to its neighboring churches. An elderly lady needed to be taken to and from her daily physical therapy sessions but her church didn't have enough volunteers available on weekdays. Only one church considered the request and answered the call, a Metropolitan Church whose congregation is made up of primarily gay and lesbian Christians. The small church gladly accepted their help.

But even after Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan, not all his listeners were moved, still holding fast to their convenient faith.

It was good enough for Grandpa
It's good enough for me.

When Copernicus rocked the world with his discovery that the sun and not the earth was at the center of the solar system, many rejected his findings as heresy because they mistakenly believed it contradicted the scriptures. Only when the brouhaha died down sensible people realized they had to unlearn their preconceived notions before they could reorient their lives around this new reality.

Today's reading from Luke's Acts of the Apostles tells of an earlier watershed moment that found Peter having to either reject or embrace an inconvenient faith that would force him to unlearn his preconceived notions before he could reorient himself around this new truth: the Gospel is not just for people who look, think, or act like him.

Luke begins by introducing Cornelius, a Roman Centurion, who suddenly experienced the first in a series of divine interventions when he was visited by an angel who instructed him to send for Peter who was staying in a nearby town.

The scene then switches to Peter, who while in prayer suddenly falls into a trance-like state and sees a vision of something like a large white tablecloth being lowered to the ground by its four corners. On it were all kinds of four footed creatures, reptiles and birds... Then he heard a voice from above saying, "Get up Peter, kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means Lord, for I have never eaten anything unclean." (Acts 10:11-14)

Put yourself in Peter's shoes. Peter was being asked to do something that went against everything his old time religion taught about ritually unclean food. But also consider this, for three years Peter watched Jesus challenge the scribes and Pharisees' precious preconceived notions about dietary laws and separating themselves from Gentiles who were, in their eyes, unclean. Obviously, Peter still didn't get it, even after hearing Jesus' command, "Go and make disciples of all nations..."

In Peter's defense, having never eaten unclean food because he was taught from childhood it was nasty stuff, the thought of eating it probably made him gag. It would be the same if you or I being guests in a foreign country were told we're having dog for dinner.

Luckily for Peter before he had to eat anything and after hearing the voice say, "What God has made clean you must not profane," he suddenly came out of the trance.

After he regained consciousness Peter had to be thinking, "What the heck was that all about?" when suddenly his train of thought was interrupted by the news there were messengers at the door, Gentile messengers, who came to fetch and bring him to the house of a Roman Centurion.

It's a safe bet that as the next twenty-four hours unfolded, at some point it finally dawned on Peter that God was birthing something new and revolutionary, but its acceptance by him, would only come through struggling with an inconvenient faith.

Peter did a bold thing when he baptized Cornelius and his household. Nothing like that was ever done before! He knew he'd have a lot of explaining to do when he got back to Jerusalem to the other Apostles. Maybe they'd condemn him for going too far without their permission. Then again how could he not baptize the Gentiles after the Holy Spirit was being poured out all over them as powerfully as it happened to those gathered in the Upper Room on the feast of Pentecost? What's more, having that vision on the roof and then moments later hearing Cornelius' messengers knocking at the door, and then hearing about Cornelius being instructed by the angel to invite Peter to his house, it became obvious God was up to something.

Peter could've dismissed his vision as a nonsensical dream and Cornelius' invitation to visit him as a curious coincidence, but he didn't. Instead, open to the possibility God was in the mix, Peter took the risk and entered the struggle that led him to reject his old religion and then faithfully go along with the flow.

Certainly Peter's decision to baptize the Gentiles was one of those watershed moments in the formation of Christ's Church.

Another of those watershed moments occurred 1,500 years later when Martin Luther boldly challenged the convenient faith of the Medieval Church and preached a gospel of liberation from its stifling old time religion that put Christ in a strait jacket.

Five hundred years later, the Church continues to be in a state of flux as we're still being challenged from above to question our preconceived notions, despite our desire to have things done decently and in order. But if we take this mantra "doing things decently and in order" too far, we're in danger of becoming self-serving and shallow, like the leadership of the Jerusalem Temple in Jesus' day. All the more reason to capture Christ's vision for his Church by watching Jesus breaking down walls and building bridges to bring Jews and Gentiles together and listening to Jesus plead with the respectable religious folks to open their hearts and minds and simply love God, their neighbors and even themselves in ways they never dreamed. Then remember Jesus going to his cross, not to die for an idea whose time has come, but for the sins of the world so we can be forgiven and made new.

Also, watch Peter and Paul, both commissioned to continue what Jesus started as they came to realize after much struggle and grief, it was time to let go of their convenient faith and take on that messy, inconvenient faith modeled first by Jesus himself.

The Gospel is about God expanding the boundaries of his Kingdom so everyone can know the love of Christ and be saved. If that's to happen through you and me, we have to be willing to test our preconceived notions and be ready to welcome and embrace all people, doing unto them what we would have them do unto us.

But let me make myself clear. When I say Jesus came to expand the boundaries of the Kingdom, and he warned the Pharisees that the tax collectors, sinners and all the

other so called unclean people would enter the Kingdom before they would, he wasn't preaching a gospel of "anything goes." Jesus had high standards, especially when it came to our own spiritual growth and call to discipleship. The Christian who is serious about loving Jesus will deny himself, take up the cross, and follow Jesus to that white tablecloth filled with seemingly unclean, unworthy, unorthodox sinners who in God's eyes are no different than you or me because all of us stand at the foot of the cross in need of forgiveness and healing.

Knowing you all to be thoughtful and serious Christians, I'll leave it up to you to discern how God is calling you to change and what Christ is calling you to do, as long as you search the scriptures, pray without ceasing and seek out the fellowship of the beloved community. If you do these things, you'll experience some pain and confusion as you sift through the mess of an inconvenient faith, but through it all, you'll also experience new birth and new life.

May God bless and empower us, and may we gladly receive this blessing and empowerment so we will bear the fruit that only comes from having an inconvenient faith.