

“Outside the Comfort Zone”

Last week we read the story of Jesus’ last command to his disciples – to go and make disciples of all nations – and I told you that the word translated “nations” is actually the word for “gentiles”.

Jesus gave that command, and then the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles, and they began to preach, but Peter, it seems, has only been preaching to fellow Israelites.

Peter, it seems, was suffering from what is known as “cognitive dissonance”.

Of all the concepts I learned in my psychology classes I found this one to be the most fascinating for it explains so much of human nature.

When we hold a strong belief, and someone expresses a contrary belief we often don’t hear it.

And even if we hear it we tend to automatically reject it.

If it doesn’t fit with what we already believe, it can’t get into our minds.

I think that’s what was happening with Peter.

Jesus had commanded him to go and make disciples of Gentiles,

but that didn’t fit with what Peter had been taught all his life.

Peter was a Jew and the Jews were God’s chosen people.

They were special. They were better. God preferred them.

Practically their whole religion was about differentiating themselves from others.

They practiced circumcision, they ate different foods, they performed special rituals.

They divided the world into clean and unclean people,

and it was of utmost importance to keep that division in place.

That’s what the rules were for – to make sure that God’s chosen people kept themselves to themselves.

Even Jesus started out thinking this way.

When a Samaritan woman wanted him to heal her daughter

he said it wasn’t fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.

But when the woman reminded him that even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table,

Jesus’ own vision of his mission was expanded.

Jesus had grown in his understanding that God’s love was meant for more than Israel,

but Peter had not yet reached that point.

For Peter it was still “us versus them”, “the clean versus the unclean”, “the chosen versus the unchosen”.

God wanted to expand Peter’s understanding, so he sent Peter a vision.

In this vision a sheet was lowered from the heavens

and on the sheet were all kinds of animals and birds and reptiles

and in the vision God says, “Eat!” and Peter says, “I can’t! Those animals are unclean!”.

Now you can understand Peter.

All of his life he had been taught that God had instructed the Jews not to eat unclean animals.

It said so in the Bible. It’s what the rabbis instructed. It’s what all good Jews practiced on a daily basis.

It was one of the main things that set Jews apart,

one of the central tenets of their religion, a vital part of their identity.

And now here was God telling him to eat unclean food! It didn’t make sense.

No wonder Peter had trouble understanding.

It didn’t fit with everything else he had been taught, so he just couldn’t accept it.

Here was God changing the rules – telling him that they no longer applied, that they were getting in the way.

Here was God saying it wasn’t about the rules at all –

it was about something far more important than the rules –

it was about God’s radical love and unconditional grace. And it just didn’t fit into Peter’s belief system.

So God sends the vision again. And again. And even after the third time Peter is still puzzled!

Then the group of Gentiles arrives and Peter begins to get it.

He goes with the group to Cornelius' house but even then he's uncomfortable.

He's there but his attitude still leaves something to be desired.

He starts out by affirming their differences - how he's part of the chosen people and how they aren't,
but then as he begins to share his vision,

he begins to understand that it's not about him, part of the chosen people
being nice and sharing what he has from a place of power and privilege
with those who are somehow inferior or less deserving.

Peter begins to understand that God loves Cornelius and his household and all the Gentiles
every bit as much as God loves Peter and the apostles and the people of Israel.

Peter begins to understand that the message of the gospel is a message of God's love
that breaks down every barrier and tears down every wall and removes every obstacle.

In practice, what that means for Peter

is that the Gentiles do not have to become like Jews in order to be followers of Jesus.

All of the things that are important to Peter - all of his traditions, all of his beliefs, all of his practices -
he needs to be willing to give up.

It's not his job to get others to believe and to act like him.

He is not to expect these people to be converted to his way of life,

eating the things he eats, singing the hymns he likes, practicing the rituals he performs.

Instead, he is supposed to adapt himself to their customs

so that he can communicate God's unconditional love to them.

I have to tell you that this story is my story this past year.

Like Peter I was only comfortable within my own group - my group of white Lutherans.

For two years I had very little to do with the people of Bridgeport House of Worship.

I went to their events when I was invited, but I felt like an outsider.

For someone who grew up in a completely white world

and who is a pastor in the whitest denomination in the country,

I was not entirely comfortable with a black congregation.

And it wasn't just race that made me uncomfortable - it was denomination.

The ELCA is a liberal mainline denomination;

Bridgeport House of Worship was a conservative Pentecostal group.

I looked down on them because they weren't as educated as we were

and they interpreted the Bible literally.

And their worship seemed a bit chaotic and rambunctious.

And to top it off they spoke in tongues which just seemed weird and wacky to me.

I was so much like Peter, feeling superior and arrogant and right.

But just as God had other plans for Peter, God had other plans for me.

As I got to know Pastor Simmonds, I discovered he's one of the most intelligent people I've ever met.

As I got to know the congregation, I discovered they are an incredibly loving & welcoming group of people.

While they interpret some parts of the Bible literally that I don't,

it turns out that when it comes to Communion & Baptism,

Lutherans interpret the Bible more literally than they!

And while their worship may not be as refined or orderly or beautiful as ours,

it has an energy and excitement and exuberance that we lack.

The reason that God sent Peter to the Gentiles was not just to benefit the Gentiles, it was to benefit Peter.

The reason that God brought Bridgeport House of worship to Salem

was not just to benefit them but to benefit us.

What Peter learned and what I have learned is that
as long as we stay within our own tribe, in our own comfort zone, with people who are just like us,
we will never grow into our full potential.
In order to grow into the people that God has called us to be,
we need to be stretched and challenged and forced to grow,
and that only happens when we are in relationship with those who are different from us.
And when we are in relationship with those who are different,
then we are changed and they are changed
and we both experience the radical message of the gospel –
that God's love is not for some small chosen group but for every single child of God.

God called Peter to step out of his comfort zone.
God told Peter he had to be willing to give up the traditions and customs that he believed in,
because they were getting in the way of his communicating God's unconditional love.
God called Peter into relationship with people who were different from him –
so that both he and they would be transformed by the experience.

God calls us also – to step out of our comfort zone,
to be willing to give up our traditions and customs
whenever they get in the way of our communicating God's love,
and to build relationships with people who are different from us.

As Christians we are called to share the news of God's unlimited, unconditional, and unbounded love –
a love that breaks down barriers, that tears down walls, and that removes obstacles and divisions.
When we are willing to step out of our comfort zone
and enter into relationship with those who are different from us,
not from a place of power or privilege, but from a place of equality
we will discover that we have things to learn as well as teach, and gifts to receive as well as give.

And as we share our knowledge and experience and gifts,
we will come to know a richer and fuller and more radical love than we have ever known before,
and we will experience the transformative power of the Spirit,
a power that can change our lives,
a power that can change our congregation
and a power that can change the world.

God calls us to step out of our comfort zone and when we do, we'll discover something surprising.
What we thought of as our comfort zone was just the familiar walls of a prison cell,
but outside those walls there is an entire world – beautiful, colorful, exquisite –
and rich with love and grace and hope. **Amen**