

**May 23, 2021**  
**God Moves in Creative Ways ...**  
**Acts 10:1-35**

At UBC I got to know a Ph.D. student, Hasbullah, from Sri Lanka. I introduced Has to Canadian culture, Canadian food, and Canadian snow. He introduced me to Sri Lankan culture and Sri Lankan food. We also talked about life. We talked about our spiritual faith. Has was from a Moslem background. We talked about his religion. I talked with him about Jesus. It was a wonderful cross-cultural friendship and inter-faith dialogue, in which I was privileged to share about Jesus with a person who had never met a Christian before.

In Acts 10, Peter – a good Jewish man who, in good Jewish fashion kept his circle of friends limited to other good Jewish people – finds himself in a cross-cultural world, too ...

***Jonah, Peter and Cornelius***

Peter is in Joppa. Remember Joppa? Way back, God called Jonah to go EAST to Nineveh (modern day Iraq) and preach to the Assyrians about the grace of God. The Assyrians were Israel's enemy, a violent, warlike people. For a Jew to enter Nineveh was potentially suicide. Besides, Jonah was certain God and His salvation were only for the Jews. Jonah goes to **Joppa**. In Joppa, Jonah faces a challenging choice: will he take up God's invitation or not? Jonah finds a fast, WESTbound ship and flees as far from Nineveh as possible, bound for Tarshish, in Spain. How does that work out? (remember the big fish and all that?)

Peter is now in **Joppa**. God speaks to Peter. Interestingly, God doesn't speak to Peter in straightforward language. God chooses a creative way of communicating. As we celebrate creative arts today, it's interesting that God is VERY creative Himself (not surprising, given He created the incredible, glorious, diverse universe in which we live). *"Something like a large sheet was let down by its four corners. In the sheet were all sorts of animals, reptiles, and birds. Then a voice said to him, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat them.'* 'No, Lord,' Peter declared. *'I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure and unclean.'* But the voice spoke again: *'Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean.'* *The same vision was repeated three times"*(10:11-16). This is not really about food. It's about something more. It's about Peter learning that Jesus' love is for all people ...

Let's journey up the coast, north to Caesarea, a bustling city, the Roman capital of Judea. One Roman soldier living there was a centurion (equivalent of a captain), Cornelius. During Cornelius' time in Judea, he has come to believe in the God of the Jews. He lives out his faith by praying regularly and giving generously to the poor.

As Cornelius prays one afternoon, an angel calls him by name, and tells him to send for Peter, in Joppa. Cornelius, a Roman, like the Assyrians back in Jonah's day, is Israel's enemy, a violent, warlike people. Peter, like Jonah, has thought Jesus and His salvation are for Jews and only Jews. In Joppa, Peter faces a challenging choice: will he take up God's invitation to share God's love or not? Peter chooses to go. Cornelius and "all who heard" believe (reminiscent of the Ninevites' response to Jonah, when he finally got there).

To us, unfamiliar with those times, it all sounds so commonsense. But to Peter and other Jewish Christians, for Peter to visit Cornelius was just as stupendous as Jonah journeying to the wicked city of Nineveh. In both Jonah's and Peter's Jewish world, Jewish people believed only they were God's people. Everyone else – Syrians, Romans, Greeks, Africans, Persians, Europeans (like me) – were out of God's kingdom, collectively called "Gentile dogs."

Rules and regulations were created to define un-crossable boundaries between Jews and non-Jews (and even Jewish women). No Jew was permitted to enter the home of a Gentile/non-Jew, even a God-fearing one like Cornelius, or invite such a person into their home. Even though Cornelius is "*a devout and God-fearing man, well respected by all the Jews*"(10:22), he is a Gentile. As Peter says, "*You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you*"(10:28).

But that vision of the sheet was God showing Peter that he should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean. This is overturning millennia of Jewish tradition. And it is confirming a whole new era in which God's love is for anyone and everyone.

### ***The church down here and the church up there ...***

Jesus, of course, modelled the good news of the Kingdom of God is for all people. He shared God's love with women, children, Romans, Syrians, Phoenicians (Lebanese), people with disabilities, people who are demon-possessed, and "sinners" of all types. With God's love, Jesus even touched untouchable people with diseases like leprosy. As people of Jesus, Paul writes, "*it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us*" (Colossians 3:11). John, in his vision of heaven, sees "*a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language*"(Revelation 7:9-10). The Kingdom of God – and church – is multi-ethnic and multi-everything.

The challenge for us is that the church down here (us, right now) should look like the church up there (in heaven). Does it? I am excited about how diverse our congregation is – ethnically, but also in terms of ages, experiences, backgrounds, abilities, creativity, gifts, skills, and other measures (creative arts Sunday emphasizes just how different we all are!). That's fantastic. We continue to challenge ourselves to be more and more multi-everything. In good (non-Covid) times, we can think in terms of how we relate to visitors Sunday morning (who comes **to** us). But also in terms of people we go **out to**. Who do we make friends with? Who do we spend time with? People just like us, or ... "others"?

I hope we can say a hearty "Amen!" to the truth that our church should welcome **everyone** in the name of Jesus. That's great in theory. It is less comfortable to think about how **I** will live out my faith in the complexities of the real world.

Perhaps this "pause" during Covid, gives us space, to think about how we relate to First Nations people, to Latter-Day Saints, to Moslem people, to non-religious people. We have space to reflect on the fact Lethbridge has the second highest rate of people living in poverty

in Alberta (next to Medicine Hat). Living with a low-income is the reality for 1 in 5 children, 1 in 4 urban Aboriginal people, and 1 in 3 single-parent families. We live in a community where alcohol and drug use have exploded during Covid. In 2020, our opioid death rate was the highest in Alberta (44/100,000) – higher than our Covid death rate. How do we deal with this? How do we bring the love of Jesus in this context? How would Jesus love our city? Those are hard questions; there are no easy answers.

Lethbridge is our Joppa. In Joppa, both Jonah and Peter faced a choice. They were faced with the challenge of EITHER bringing God's love, hope, mercy and grace to people who they thought were not like themselves OR running away. Jonah ran (till God grabbed him by the scruff of the neck). Peter chose to see an opportunity to share God's love. What about us? We face a challenging choice. Will we bring God's love, hope, mercy and grace to people in our community? Or will we turn away?

### ***God Moves in Creative Ways***

God wanted Jonah and Peter to see His love and grace is for ALL people. As the hum and hah, God pushes them both out of their comfort zones. He finds creative ways to do that. With Jonah it involves a fish. With Peter, a blanket. Through the experience, both Jonah and Peter will grow in their faith. And, people will come to know God and His love through them.

God is still finding creative ways for people to experience His love and grace. In 2021, God has brought the global mission field to Lethbridge. God has lowered a blanket filled with all sorts of interesting people, moved them into our neighbourhoods. I don't have to go overseas to share God's love with people who do not know Jesus – God has moved them in next door. Whereas I would never be able to share my faith with a Muslim in Syria, we have been able to share Jesus with an entire family of Syrians who came here as refugees. God is telling us we should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean. Like Peter, God wants us to love them all, in the name of Jesus.

What this calls me to, however, is to rethink how I see myself as a follower of Jesus. Once upon a time (so the story goes) Canada was nominally a "Christian" nation. In a "Christian country," I didn't have to have a personal relationship with Jesus, I just lived a good life and maybe went to church. The church produced generations of "good" people who lived watered-down, Christian values (on the surface anyway). But we didn't know Jesus. Then, when people came from other cultures, our nominal "Christian" worldview couldn't cope. I might prefer to live in a "safe," half-hearted Christian culture. But that's not reality anymore. Rather than getting bitter, I need to see this as a God-given opportunity. **God** has brought the mission field to my door. I'm in Joppa, facing a choice ...

Will I bunker down and hide? Complain and grumble? Turn away? Or will I see and seize this amazing opportunity to live out my faith? Following Jesus was never intended to be a "safe" way to live in a "Christian" country. It was always intended to be a missional life of purposeful living, sharing God's love on the front lines. As we've seen in Acts – with Peter, Stephen, Philip, and Ananias – following Jesus is about living for Jesus as "salt and light" in a world with very different values. One of our lodge residents, restricted to their building, who

could feel they have nothing to offer, texted me, *"My job is to tell others God offers a different perspective on life. I need your prayers."* What a fantastic attitude!

This challenges us to rethink who we are as a church. In a nominally Christian culture, the church is about what it can do for **me** – I like it when it provides what **I** want: nice music, uplifting sermon, familiar face (in good times, great conversation and free coffee).

But if we are on a mission field (as we are), the church becomes our home base. It's where we come to be renewed, encouraged, and taught so we can serve others. It's where we encourage one another, help one another, pray for one another. We wrestle together through deep questions: how do we deal with people of other faiths? With issues like poverty? Racism? Homelessness? How do we love our neighbours, in the name of Jesus? We search for creative answers. **And then we go out** into our community, and we live in Jesus and for Jesus through our lives, actions, words, and acts of love and mercy.

This is hard. It calls for deeper prayer and more creative problem solving. It is much easier to be nominally Christian in a nominally Christian culture. But Lethbridge is a mission field like Nineveh or Caesarea. WE have **God-given** opportunities. This isn't Kansas anymore! It is far more exciting than a nominal life. As we wrestle through challenges in 2021, we will grow in our faith. In this missional world, our lives have meaning and purpose; what we do and say matters. We have the privilege to change lives and change the world.

God invites us to share His love with the Assyrians/Corneliuses/Hasbullahs who live in Lethbridge in 2021. That's exciting. This month, Kyle's Youth devotional series is "Do Something." He's challenging youth to help youth identify issues in their world and to be part of the solution, no matter how small their actions might appear, given how big the issues are.

Youth Motivational Speaker, Josh Shipp, says, *"You either get bitter or you get better. It's that simple. You either take what has been dealt to you and allow it to make you a better person, or you allow it to tear you down. The choice belongs to you."*

We can get bitter ... or we can get better. We can all take on the challenge to "Do Something." To BE good news of Jesus in our family, friendships, and community. This week make a choice. No more complaining. No more criticism. But, using some creativity (in light of Covid), choose to be better. Be an encourager, a builder, a positive person – be GOOD news.

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