

*"Sharing the Vision"*

I've long had a deep appreciation for the book of ACTS but these days I am learning to love it more and more. We have just begun to study it at our Harbor Hill Bible Study on Thursdays. Connected to the gospel of LUKE (written by the same author), ACTS picks up where LUKE finishes and tells the story of the emerging early church. It is fascinating and unless we really study it we may completely miss the understanding that from the very beginning, the church has been in a state of transformation, of change, of evolution and that all through its history and into our present time, has been a continuation of this growing, living thing we call the church. It is pretty exciting!

Of particular importance to Luke, the author of ACTS, is the presence and power of the Holy Spirit among the followers of Jesus. Early in the story we have the telling of the experience of Pentecost, the event we will be celebrating in 3 weeks. It tells of how the promised Holy Spirit comes upon the gathered disciples there in an upper room in Jerusalem. Then we see how that Spirit empowered and directed many of them, especially Peter and John, Stephen (the church's first martyr) and Philip and eventually Saul (later to be named Paul).

And then we come to this story in chapter 11. It actually begins in chapter 10. Simon Peter is in a town named Joppa on the Mediterranean Sea. He has just been involved in some healings - remember last week's story of Tabitha? - and is now staying with another man named Simon, a tanner. Luke then introduces us to another man, Cornelius, an centurion living in Caesare'a, a city also on the coast of the Mediterranean about 36 miles north of Joppa.

And what we are about to see in this story is the intersection of two lives that could hardly have been any more different from each other. Simon Peter is a Jewish fisherman who has left his livelihood to follow a traveling peasant rabbi (not that he was making a lot of money fishing but at least it was a fairly secure job) and now, since the death of that teacher, is with a strange assortment of men and women who are part of some new religious sect called "The Way."

This other guy, Cornelius, is Italian and a centurion. He works for the Roman guard. He has a high rank and great responsibilities. He is committed to his work and to his country, the Roman Empire. He is looked up to by many within the social structure in which he lives. His family and entire household are completely dependent upon him. He, like Peter, is a devout man though probably not converted to Judaism, but who fears God and gives generously to the poor and has a committed prayer life.

And as Luke tells us, they both have visions. And Luke wants us to understand that this is an important story, a very important story, as he tells it to us twice, once as it happens, and then again as Peter tells it, almost word for word as we've already heard it, to the apostles and others in Jerusalem. And actually, he will refer to it again a third time (though not tell the whole story as he has here) later in the 15th chapter. We also know this is important because it is filled with all kinds of sets of threes but that's a sermon for another time.

What's interesting here is that, of course, neither of these men were expecting to have a vision. Also important to note is that they both receive their visions while they are praying. Cornelius has a vision that instructs him to have this man named Simon who is called Peter in Joppa, brought to him. Peter has a vision of a sheet full of animals meant to be eaten but which are outside the dietary restrictions of his Jewish teachings but which he is told he should go ahead and eat anyway but the message he receives from this vision, the way he interprets it has less to do with eating or about what kinds of animals one may consume, than it does with those words spoken to him in the vision, *"What God has cleansed, you must not call common."*

And what we end up with is the opening up of the gospel, of this new religion called "The Way" to those outside the Jewish faith, those previously considered "unclean" or "common". It is no longer understood as something just for the Jewish people. God's Covenant promises are now open to Gentiles, to all people around the world and importantly, that this has been made manifest by God as evidenced by the presence of the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius and his entire household. This is huge!!! It completely changed the direction of what the church was to become. Something none of those first followers of Jesus would have imagined!

In times of transition, visions lead people forward. In the new movie "42" the story of Jackie Robinson, the first person of color to play in major league baseball, the Brooklyn Dodgers president Branch Rickey seems to have a vision. It is prompted by an incident years earlier when he was head coach for Ohio Wesleyan University's baseball team, when their catcher, the only black man on the team was refused a room at a local inn. That injustice haunted Rickey his entire life. He became possessed with the idea of integrating the major leagues, which at the time was a staunchly white, American institution.

While discussing with his cohorts why he wants to bring Robinson onto the Dodgers team, Rickey says that Robinson is a man willing to stand up and fight for what he believes is right, proven by the fact that while in the military he risked court martial because he refused to sit in the back of a bus. At that point Rickey says, *"If he were white, we'd call that spirit. Robinson's a Methodist. I'm a Methodist. God's a Methodist! We can't go wrong!"* Rickey's belief in his vision is so strong that he eventually convinces them. Likewise, he is able to convince Robinson to come play with his team and the intersection of these two men, and of what becomes their shared vision, changes the world.

We've learned that there was an intersection between Rickey and another man who had a major impact on his life. Linda Warner's father was Professor of Ethics at Ohio Wesleyan and had Rickey as a student. Rickey would credit him for helping develop his strong sense of social morality. And if you want a sense of how this all changed the world, just ask Carol Bisbee what it was like to see Robinson play on the field and break the color barrier. These were amazing times, times of transition.

We live in a time of transition. Many things are changing in our world. Many things need to change in our world. And change will come but it may come in ways that are contrary to the ways of love that Jesus commanded us to have for one another. Like Peter and Cornelius, we need to be devout in prayer and in our commitment to God and God's ways. But we also need to be open to whatever vision God puts before us, even if it means changing from our old established ways of being, stepping out of our comfort zones or even risking our lives. We must be willing to intersect with those who may be totally different than we are but with whom God is calling us to share a vision. I have no idea what kind of vision God has for us but I know the Spirit is working here among us. We cannot go forward without it. May God bless us with the courage, wisdom and discernment of the Spirit as we open ourselves to the vision we are called to share. Amen.