

“Mission Is Personal”

Acts 10:1-16, 44-48



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There is no such thing as a mission without a missionary. One of my childhood fears was that God would call me to be a missionary among the cannibals in Africa. Then, in my freshman year in college, I was asked to sing at a church's missionary conference. The preacher spoke on God's call to the mission field and I could feel the tug I have learned to read as God's touch.

I thought, “Oh, no, I really am headed to the cannibals.” But then, the next year I was in a bible study and learned that in the bible a missionary was someone who started churches and new movements of faith. I thought, “Now I could be that kind of missionary.” And so I have been. I have started new congregations, new classes and movements of faith, led the conference in creating new congregations and even now being part of a new campus of St. Luke's. And I have met a few parishioners who seem to enjoy

devouring humans! But no missionary acts in isolation. There are those who are missionaries alongside. I guess that would include you, wouldn't it? Perhaps you have had some of those same fears about being a missionary that I did. How thankful I am for those who minister the love of Christ in other parts of the world. But there are different kinds of missionaries, and a missionary is anyone who is part of a God-called mission.

Peter knew he was a called missionary. He was the leader of that motley crew that had received from Jesus the great “Co-mission.” I loved that word commission, because it means “in mission with.” We are missionaries in co-mission with Christ and missionaries in co-mission with each other. That means that we're never alone. Let me remind you of what Jesus told them: **“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20)**

Peter knew that he was to get as many of his Jewish brothers and sisters to follow Christ as possible. All was going fine. God was blessing his work, even doing miracles through him right outside the synagogue. Then God rocked his world. It's really a funny scene. He is on the roof praying and he got really hungry. So he invites somebody at the house to get him something to eat. While he is waiting and continuing to pray, he has a vision about food, a sheet with all kinds of animals on it. He must have thought, “I've either had too much sun up here or I was hungrier than I thought.” Then he heard a voice say, “Get up, Peter! Kill and eat.” He looked closer at the animals and saw they were animals no Jew would kill and eat. They were the animals the Gentiles and pagans killed and ate.

“This must be a test,” Peter thought. So he gives what he thinks is the right response, “No way, Lord. You know I would never eat this unclean, ungodly food.” But he was completely shocked to hear the Lord's response, “Don't all unclean and ungodly what God has made clean and godly.”

This event is likely to have happened in the first few years after the resurrection of Jesus. The reason the Christian faith was so persecuted and resisted was that it was seen as a Jewish cult. The critics called it “the Way” and were determined to eliminate it. But the disciples themselves saw their mission as a reform movement of the Jewish faith, too. And one of the key things that distinguished Jews from the Gentiles was the food laws. You may remember the story in Daniel, one of the latest written Old Testament books,

of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Their more famous story is the one in which they were thrown into the fiery furnace. But there is another story in which they chose to eat only vegetables, only kosher food. God honored their commitment and made them healthier than all the Gentiles around them. Bottom line: Stay true to the food laws because they remind you of who you are and they are a source of blessing from God. Peter was raised from a boy to follow those kosher laws – no ham, no shrimp, nothing non-kosher. Why did this vision happen? The answer to that question gives us the basic principles of being a missionary. And remember, as a follower of Jesus Christ, you are one of them!

The first principle is this: **We don't take Christ to anybody. We offer the Christ that is already there. We just make him obvious.** There was another vision happening, this one to a God-fearing centurion named Cornelius. He is told to look for a man named Peter in Joppa and bring him to his house, because he will be the answer to his prayers. Have you discovered yet that following Christ is not about forcing things or making them happen? It's about being a vessel that will allow God to work who is already making things happen. If we don't remember that then we will suffer from the "better than thou" attitude the world resents. So does God, for that matter. We are not the superior who "have it" taking it to the inferior ones who "don't have it". Christ is already there. Christ is already drawing people to himself. We just make it obvious.

Now we're ready for the second principle: **The initiative for people to experience Christ lies with us.** Wouldn't it have been easier for Cornelius to go to Peter's house? After all, he's a centurion. He can go wherever and talk to whomever he pleases. The two generations before us, including the generation that gave birth to St. Luke's was fairly unique in Christian history. One of the theme songs of the day was "Whosoever will may come." The church was one of the major socialization networks of the day. Being part of a church was a good place to meet friends and network professionally. And it was impossible to win political office without being a church member. In those generations, churches competed by offering the best preachers, the best music programs, the most beautiful buildings and the friendliest atmosphere. Those who did that were the fullest and wealthiest. Evangelism was about connecting with those who came to visit on Sunday morning. But clearly the initiative was with the visitors themselves. The attitude of churches was "our doors are open and you are free to come. Once you come in, we hope you'll stay."

That was an anomaly in Church history. Throughout all the other generations, including the one we are now in, the initiative is not the visitor's, but the church's. It is not the visitor who is to take the big risk, but the missionary. Peter risks being misunderstood and rejected. I regret to inform those who have not discovered it that the era of "whosoever will may come" died about twenty-five years ago and churches have just been slow to have the funeral for it. We have been content to compete with each other for a smaller and smaller group of people who will still come to us, when the need for the church to go to where people are has never been greater. Most people outside the church now could care less whether your preacher can preach, your choir or praise team can sing well, or whether your youth groups so around the world on mission trips. Because they will never enter your doors. **Missionary churches are not "whosoever will may come" churches, they are "go ye into all the world" churches. Clearly the initiative is with us.**

But we have not yet gotten to the most important principle in this story. Was Cornelius Jewish or Gentile? He was a Roman military leader with 100 soldiers under his command, definitely Gentile. When Peter gets to the centurion's house, what kinds of food are likely to be served? This will definitely not be kosher. Peter could have insisted that prior to his visit that only kosher food be served. After all, the people he meets are supposed to become like him, not him become like them. Church people often talk like that. We don't have to change to draw people to us. They need to change and become like us. **But Peter's encounter with the sheet gives the #1 item on the job description and our third missionary principal: You must be multi-cultural and multi-lingual.** Peter already spoke the language, but Jewish

faith insisted that followers were to be separate, not part of the culture. God was saying to Peter that he would have to be in the culture to meet the people where they were. Ministry today requires the same of us. What other language do you need to know? It is the language of those with whom God has called you to be. To be in West Texas, I have had to learn that “fixin’” to do things has nothing to do with something being broken. I learned that there were “tanks” that had no gunners on them, but instead were filled with water.” In Lubbock, I have learned that “liberal” is a worse cussword than many of the 4-letter kinds. You may not have to learn Chinese, but you may have to learn the lingo that communicates best with different ages, professions, and neighborhoods. The point is that the initiative for learning the language and culture of those God calls us to serve and share Christ with lies with us. We knock on doors. We listen and share common stories, humor, dreams and concerns. We build relationships and create opportunities for Christ to meet them and us right where we are. Then, when we verbally share Christ it is neither offensive nor new, for they have been watching us share Christ all along – on their turf, in their language, and in the lives they are living.

Frankly, it’s easier to be the “whosoever will may come” Church or the “build a better mousetrap” Church. It also wins comparatively few people for the kingdom of God. But noticed what happened with Peter. Cornelius says to Peter in Acts 10:33, **“I sent for you and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.”**

It’s not just Peter and Cornelius. It’s Peter and Cornelius, his wife, his children, his slaves, some fellow soldiers, and who knows who else. Who, here, has discovered that when we share Christ there is always more going on than we think? Who here has come to realize that what we think we’re about in this campaign is only the tip of the iceberg for what God is about. Peter discovers what really is at stake and shares the first sermon to Gentiles. And what were the results?

“While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles...”

God had a mission for his church that was bigger than they thought it was. And so he called a missionary. It was a vision that for Peter became personal – that God was already there ahead of him, that would require him to go where it wasn’t safe and most of all to become multi-lingual and multi-cultural. And then the Spirit fell. It’s not our efforts that make the difference. It’s about becoming an instrument through which the Holy Spirit makes the difference.

Through this campaign, we are choosing to place St. Luke’s Lubbock in the path of many new people who will come to our city. We will be where they are, making a new beginning as they make a new beginning. We are people on a mission. We are missionaries. What is God about to do in and through us? A whole lot more than we think!