

Sermon “Spreading like Wildfire”

Kirk of St James

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I have been thinking about boundaries the last while. Motivated primarily by the realization that every boundary you try to set at home your children will endeavor to tread the line as finely as possible. In fact, when you ask them not to do something they might go so far as to ask you “well how about this? Or what about this?” I have also been wondering about boundaries when I think of the world refugee crises and how an invisible line on a map can mean something different to the people living on either side of it. No trespassing signs mark areas that are out of bounds, sports teams sometimes win or lose depending on where a ball comes down on a line, a swimming pool can quickly go from shallow to deep depending on where you put your feet down. Sometimes crossing a boarder can be an exciting experience while other times it can be scary. Our world is divided by boarders and boundaries that affect the languages we speak, the currencies we use, and how we understand our identities in the world. The Canadian stereotypes of always saying sorry, and our love for doughnuts and coffee are widely known.

“We learn and know who we are by both our identification with “our people” and our differentiation from those who are not. Families, groups of friends, cliques at school, departments at work, denominations and religions, nations and alliances, and countless other groupings and associations depend on various boundaries to create and sustain themselves.” Sometimes so effectively that we are not even aware that these things exist. In the ancient world there were clear boundaries between Jews and Gentiles. Going back to Israel some of these things were what set their nation apart by God—it is how they became distinct as God’s people. Years, generations, and centuries passed where these laws were taught, and rules around what was clean and unclean were followed. In our scripture in Acts today the encounter between

Peter and Cornelius changes everything about how people understand the law and how things change with the Good news of Jesus Christ.

These changes actually begin earlier in chapter ten and culminate with the passage we read this morning. One morning Cornelius who is described as a devout man who fears God but who is also as Gentile as one could get—he was a Roman centurion, has a vision. In it he sees an angel who tells him to send for Peter. For clarity a Gentile was someone who was not part of the Jewish faith. Around the same time Peter has a vision of a sheet descending from heaven and being told “Not to call anything impure which God has called clean.” Then the messengers from Cornelius arrive and Peter agrees to go with them.

Peter in Acts 10:²⁸ He said to them: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.” Suddenly these two people who lived within very clearly defined boundaries and expectations are thrown into a situation that is entirely new to them. I cannot stress enough how difficult this would have been both in this moment when they are still learning and after. Peter followed a strict kosher diet that dictated what he could eat and could not eat, how founds could be combined or not combined etc. Generations of understanding and teaching were now meeting this new vision from God. To Peter’s credit he listens to the Holy Spirit, and it in this moment after he begins teaching that the Holy Spirit falls upon the Gentiles, and the mission to take the gospel out into the world has a brand new understanding. The mission of the church reaches out to every person, and no one is excluded. The holy spirit can be disruptive, and now there is no longer stranger, foreigner or Gentile.

I often wonder at this moment, how people were so deeply affected by what Peter was preaching that they responded fully and immediately. I was thinking about this in terms of evangelism and I would call this experience a type of evangelism known as personal

evangelism. When one person shares their faith and belief so fully that people get excited by what they are hearing and want to be part of the Good news too. In our modern world that example may be difficult to picture but perhaps another example might be helpful. Burger month just closed out at the end of April, and how many of us tried a new burger because other people described it as so amazing, and delicious that you just had to try it! Priscilla Pope-Levinson talked about this in her book *Models of Evangelism* she writes “we evangelize all the time...the truth is, when we are zealous about something, when we really love it, we talk about it. We invite others to experience. We want to share the joy.” The truth is though it is easy to talk about things like burgers, or new products, or good experiences, but talking about things like religion and our faith can be daunting and scary.

“A recent study by the Barna Group documented two reasons in particular why people do not talk often about faith: avoidance and ambivalence. The actual poll numbers state 28% of people believe religious conversations always seem to create tension or arguments; 17% said they are put off by how much religion has been politicized; 17% said they feel they don’t know enough about religious or spiritual topics to talk about them.” Quite frankly I understand the concerns. We have all felt them at some point or another. Somehow in the ancient world this type of conversation was how the gospel spread. Gossiping at the well and market, talking about this new teaching where no one is left out and everyone is welcome, where miracles happen—it is all encompassing. As N.T Wright says “Cornelius didn’t want God or Peter to tolerate him. He wanted to be welcomed, forgiven, healed, transformed. And he was.”

That is the message they shared. How the gospel impacted their lives personally and what that meant for them and how they lived. This type of personal evangelism focuses on what Jesus has done and relies on the grace of the Holy Spirit. Pope-Levinson identifies two things about personal evangelism that are important. The first, “There is a stark simplicity to personal

evangelism. It requires no theological degree. It demands no need to control a conversation. It necessitates no hyper spirituality. It certainly requires no sacred space. A cafeteria will do, as will a shoe store, a home, or a prison cell..." The second is that "Christians are to be the good news before they share the good news. The words of the gospel are to be incarnated-to be lived-before they are verbalized.

Personal evangelism is about how we live in the world and how we share with others. I know it is not easy. We come to a passage like Acts today and we are reminded of the amazing news of the gospel that knows no boundaries and includes everyone. How do we share that message? We actually read the book I referenced *Models of Evangelism* for the Gudar Scholar program I attended at St Andrews Hall in August. And one of the ways they encouraged us to think about our faith was to write a seven-word testimony. How would we sum up our faith to someone else if we were to share it. It also forces us to think of it practically and make it easy to express. In the end I decided mine would be something along the lines of "Full of doubt, held in grace, hope." I doubt my abilities to be articulate and to share faith but we are held in God's grace who often works not only with us but often in spite of us. Hope is the word that sums everything up for me. I am still working on my seven word testimony, but I would love if you were able to think about what yours might be this coming week, write it down and I will have a box you can drop them in next Sunday. They can anonymous, but I would love to hear how you would describe your faith. It might surprise you.