

2 Kings 5:1-14
Luke 10:1-11

“Unconscious Christians”
1st Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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It may seem like I am stuck on a theme, these days. That is because the lectionary gives us the Gospel of Luke for this period of the year, and Luke wants you to know something. The very way in which he constructs his gospel tells how he views the mission of Christ. It begins in Bethlehem, and in ever-widening concentric circles spreads outward to include more and more people, and more and more who would have been – in that culture and time – unlikely subjects of the attention of the Messiah. The same is true with the book of Acts, which Luke wrote. It begins in Jerusalem, and increasingly widens the circle of those within the orbit of attention, until we find Paul deep among the Gentiles, in Rome itself.

This passage from Luke 10 is part of that missionary process. Only Luke describes the sending out of 70 helpers, and to readers of that time it would recall two things: the 70 elders Moses recruited to help him (Numbers 11:16ff), and the 70 nations named in Genesis – a number representative of the whole world. We might remember Luke’s description of Pentecost, and the spirit coming upon people of every nation. That is all by way of saying that Luke’s attention is global, and he understands Jesus’ mission to be global, universal.

The 70 messengers are sent out, traveling light, no time for small talk. There is an urgency about spreading this message: The Kingdom has come near you! It is the same message, whether people receive the messengers or not. Travel light, trust the hospitality of your host, don’t be shopping around for the best cook in town – these were their instructions. They were to be “lambs among wolves”, having sincerity, integrity and innocence.

They were not to pronounce gloom and doom on those who did not agree, did not receive them; simply move on, don’t judge. If we read on past verse 11, we discover that there *is* a gloom and doom pronouncement, but on whole towns and cities, rather than individuals. It seems Jesus is looking for a corporate response to the message of the coming Kingdom. The messengers are calling Israel back to its vocation, of being a light to the nations, the world.

We are not talking about mere intellectual assent to a proposition – that he wants people to believe he is the son of God so they will go to heaven. “The kingdom of heaven has come near,” is the message. The *way* he taught and described. The invitation to way, that life, is open to all. This is Luke’s way of telling us that the Gentiles – those unexpected to be so, are to be included within the mantle of grace.

Like Naaman, the Aramaean (Syrian) general in the Old Testament lesson. It is a story where the least honored in the culture save the day. Recap: He had a form of leprosy he couldn’t shake. And from the very lowest rung of Syrian society – an Israelite slave girl – came word about how to cure this, a prophet in Israel. That word made its way all the way to the throne room, and the King of Aram sent Naaman to the king of Israel, who in a comedic fit says “What do you want *me* to do about it? Do I look like a skin specialist?” (The King of Aram had forgotten to mention the prophet.) Elisha said, “I’ll handle it,” and a haughty General Naaman arrived, expecting Elisha to be subservient and do his bidding. Elisha did not even see the man himself, but sent out a servant

to say “Go wash in the river.” Naaman was furious at the insult, and resorted to his own racism and

jingoism – Aren't the Syrian rivers better than any of these? And yet his servants persuaded him to the river, and his skin became like that of a child. ("Unless you become as a child, you shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven" -?)

After this, Naaman came to faith in the God of Israel. After, not before. The healing was a gift. And a gift to an enemy; there was at the time an uneasy peace between Aram and Israel, historic foes.) So there are a lot of reversals here – an enemy is healed, the servants and slaves are the ones who really make things come out right, and *everybody's* prejudices turn out to be wrong.

Many, many years later, Jesus would stand in his home synagogue and make his point to those sure of their righteousness: "There were many lepers in Elisha's time, but none were cured except Naaman the Syrian." At which point they ran him out of town. Commentator Richard Nelson says about this passage: "It is the natural reaction of religion to be exclusive rather than inclusive." It is the natural reaction, but not the right one... which Luke also was trying to tell us.

So here's where these texts have led me... When the church gets the message right, that there is a welcome at God's table for everyone, there will be an increase in love and grace in this world. When the church gets it wrong, think we are the gatekeepers who get to say, we only contribute to division and hostility.

I read that the largest congregation in Pittsburgh Presbytery left the Presbyterian Church, the latest of several churches leaving. This is part of a conflict that started 80 years ago, and is referred to as the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. Fundamentalism was (and is) a new-fangled way of thinking, and attempted in the 1920's to take over several denominations, ours included. In the 1929 General Assembly, they lost that fight, but some never got over it, like that Pittsburgh congregation. They finally decided we were never going to be fundamentalist enough.

Here's an example of the theological disagreement: an overture to a recent General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church was defeated, actually was changed by amendment. The overture asked the GA to affirm the Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation and there is no other. After much debate the decision was to affirm that Jesus Christ is the way to salvation.

Wait, aren't those the same thing? Not quite, and the difference matters.

Those who supported the overture wanted the church to say clearly that those who did not accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior were going to hell. The church wouldn't do that, for two reasons. In committee the question was raised about the Jewish people. Was it necessary to evangelize the Jews? Answer: No. Not for those of us in the Reformed tradition. As far back as John Calvin, the theological affirmation has been made that God is a God of the Covenant, we are people of the Covenant, and God does not break Covenant (only we do). God's Covenant with the Jewish people, the chosen, must still therefore be intact. That has been Presbyterian belief for 500 years, and there was no way the church was going to say that the Jewish people are bound for damnation unless they make profession of faith in Christ.

Second issue – in Reformed theology we have never assumed that there was anything we could do to earn our salvation. It is a gift from God, and we can only respond to that grace. Others have objected to our doctrine of predestination, wanting to have some control over their salvation, but

we have always said, “No, we don’t earn salvation; God alone gives that.” Which led old John Calvin to say that you could *not* know who was saved and who was not, but only work and pray that all may be saved. And since that is God’s business, and not ours, we are free to be about our real vocation, which is *not* to get everybody to sign on the dotted line of the salvation paper, but to work to make the world more like the Kingdom of God, the Way that Christ is leading us. For us, this life is not about getting into heaven, but about living joyfully and thankfully to God.

So in that debate, the church is content to say Jesus Christ is the way to salvation, because it is the way we know, and the only story we have to tell. But it is not wise to know more than God does, and to think we know who is saved and who is not. So we said, we don’t know; God knows. And the question was raised in the hearing before that committee: “Do you really believe the God we love and serve would send Gandhi to hell?” Pretty much nobody believed that. Others have sought a theological solution in a universalism that says: Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation, and his death and resurrection were effective for everyone in the world, whether they believe it or not, whether they know it or not. (Not the most traditional doctrine, but it’s an idea.)

Why does it matter? Because we live in a world where there are easily as many people who have been damaged by bad religion as have been helped by a growing faith. And we may not be going out two by two as the 70 messengers did (or Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses do), but we do live in a multi-cultural, diverse world, growing smaller with increased communication and technology. We will be more than ever rubbing elbows with those of other faiths or no faith at all, those who make different claims for truth than we make. It might be real good for us to know what we think are God’s intentions toward humankind. Do we think Jesus was looking for people to give intellectual assent to a proposition? Or do we think he was calling people to live a new kind of life? Presbyterian teaching has come down on the side of the latter – that the new life to which he calls us, one of love and justice, service and joy, is the claim faith should make.

At least one agnostic that I knew led the most “Christian” life of anyone I knew. And I can’t imagine that the Christ I know would have rejected such a loving soul as Don Rowe. German theologian Jurgen Moltmann writes about those who could be called “unconscious Christians”, who in their lives and spirits are drawn – by God’s spirit – into ways of being that the God of life itself desires.

I once heard Robert McAfee Brown say that, “The Gospel is never advice. It is Good News of what God is doing in the world, with the consequent liberation of our spirits.”

In a world where religion has brought such bad news to so many, and continues to be a source of conflict in so many places, it is good to remember Naaman the Syrian general, all the Gentiles of Luke’s ever-widening circles, Moltmann’s unconscious Christians. I expect to see this some day, should I be granted the grace – Gandhi, Chief Joseph and Robert Johnson, seated together at Christ’s heavenly banquet. When the church gets the message right, that there is a welcome at God’s table for everyone, there will be an increase in love and grace in this world.