

Tending Community in God's Mission

"From the Center to the Periphery"

Acts 10:1-48

October 22, 2017

"These sheep don't need a shepherd, they have fences," story. 1982 Outspokin/TourMagination Anabaptist/ Mennonite history tour. (explain Outspokin)

Today we leave the first book Luke wrote and jump into the middle of his second... "Acts of the Apostles." The first book contains stories of who Jesus was and what he did while he was at our house. The second tells the story of the Apostles carrying on the movement that Jesus formed and launched, with the empowering Holy Spirit. It is the story of the transition from centered set thinking and practice to participating with God on the periphery.

Several weeks ago we explored the pivotal stories of spiritual formation for Jesus... we noted how he found His way to an open and full embrace of the mission of God in the world as his own...

We saw how important it was for Jesus to identify with the fresh movement of God by submitting himself to the baptism of John...a baptism of repentance...like he really needed the repentance part, right??...or...or...might we reimagine what repentance really is??

We read the 40-day wilderness sojourn and Jesus' encounter with the tempter, Satan, who tried valiantly to distract him from his vocational direction. We noted his call and anointing for implementing the refreshed vision of the Kingdom of God in the world...

We heard how Jesus reached back into salvation history... to pull forward the prophetic words of Isaiah that gave voice to a description of the coming Kingdom...now sometimes referred to as the "Peaceable Kingdom"... "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..." Jesus said that it now begins as he read it aloud....

Acts 10 is an incredible story... It's a key story of the Kingdom of God moving beyond the Jewish faith world, centered in Jerusalem, to include Gentiles who were always out there on the periphery...

The transition from a Jerusalem centered mindset to one that recognizes and participates with God in the scattered places, is a most challenging journey. The centered set mentality is a place of familiarity and predictability...a place of security and comfort...a place of perimeters and clear expectations...

God's Kingdom finds dynamic expression on the periphery... That movement from the center to the periphery is scary and unpredictable... But isn't that where God is most visibly active in doing God's thing...bringing good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, releasing captives and extending peace, healing and hope in the midst of chaos, brokenness and suffering...??

We too, for decades, if not centuries, have been living with a centered set mentality. We think that most vibrant faith activities happen in the church. We think if we can just get people to come to church they will then be part of the kingdom. We get very sophisticated in our strategies for getting people to come to the center of religious life, the church, rather than making the movement in the other direction. God is already active on the periphery of our worlds and in our neighborhoods if we have eyes to see and ears to hear what God is up to. We are given opportunity to join in tending the mission of God and participate in God's activity. It's not about championing issues...it's about joining God in God's mission which is often most visible on the periphery.

These new believers lived with a centered set mentality...look at Acts 1:6... *"So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?'"* They were still expecting that Jesus would set up his reign in Jerusalem to restore the throne of David even after the resurrection...In their minds this was to be a Jewish faith renewal movement not a world-wide mission.

- How is this like us?? Nationally...denominationally...or even congregationally??

So Peter and other leaders had to go through a major paradigm shift... eventually they came to see that God was going to be more active on the periphery and not just at the center. They hung tenaciously to their faith in Jesus in the wilderness of Jerusalem as the tempter challenged their focus and commitment.

Peter had just been anointed by the fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit...in Jerusalem. Later he then finds himself in Lydda for ministry, then over to Joppa...having been summoned there by Jewish new believers who were not able to keep a highly respected disciple (Tabitha/Dorcas) from death...

Peter gets to Joppa because he has been cultivating a spirituality that paid close attention to the prompting of the Holy Spirit...an incarnational spirituality. He goes out from Jerusalem...however...still with his centered set thinking...

Peter finds himself about as far to the edge as his comfort zone would allow for. He was staying at the house of a person living on the edge...Simon the tanner... who, because of his work/business, was considered unclean...handling dead animal parts. Peter places himself in a position of vulnerability and extends a word of peace...the text doesn't really say that... but that's what it looks like... He decided to stay at a tanner's house, eating and drinking what was set before him... He had to have read Luke 10... No, just kidding about Luke 10...it wasn't written yet...

Now, it's important to note the prominence of prayer in the life of this fledging expression of the Kingdom of God... Luke notes this quite often as being the practice or discipline within which God's prompting and action comes...it is that space for being in the right posture for hearing God's prompting...God's nudging...

Our story finds Peter on the roof top... in prayer... while food was being prepared downstairs. It's in this posture of prayer where one can be moved from a centered set paradigm with fences clearly defined, to an awareness of where God is already at work on the periphery. A place where God needs persons willing to be the, 'on the ground' presence, to affirm... confirm...and celebrate, God's healing and hope...

Peter, in prayer, hears a voice that confronted his centered set thinking...it challenged the conventions of what he understood faithful living to look like...He at first argues with the voice to defend his faith practice and after hearing the same challenge three times...(*remember that he also denied Jesus 3 times*) Peter is jolted back into reality by hearing his name being called by men at the front gate...

Peter leaves his place of comfort and safety to engage with these Gentiles who showed up at the house where he was guest... They were even further out on the edge than Simon the tanner... It was across a line that Peter would never have crossed before this encounter with the Lord in prayer...

Peter checks out the visitors, then, THEN...offers hospitality...to Gentile men!!! AT the home of someone else...(probably easier at Simon the tanner's house than at a Pharisee's house)... Leaving the next day...Peter took six other disciples along as witnesses... (Acts 11:12) because he knows that he will have to answer back to Jerusalem and accountability works that way. Embarking on this scary journey far out on the periphery...he seems compelled yet comforted by the Spirit to go...

But guess what?.... God is active out there way ahead of Peter...

It seems to me this story is a demonstration of what is outlined in Luke 4 and 10. While Peter wasn't specifically asking God to send more workers into the harvest...Peter WAS in prayer...! He was cultivating a relationship with God and was in a posture, a position to hear God banging on the fences of his heart...

Peter's first response is protest and he doesn't want to go there because it takes him away from the safety, the security of his centered set faith...symbolized by the practice of kosher law... BUT, this is where the Spirit of God is prompting him to go...

We can see Peter's discomfort in receiving hospitality from Gentiles in his comment in vs 28, *"you yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile...but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean."* Like... Hey, you guys know I'm not supposed to be here, don't you... BUT...!!

Now...God had already been at work on the periphery with Cornelius...before Peter's prayer... long before Peter got there...however God needed Cornelius' faith to be affirmed, confirmed and connected to the fresh expression of God's Kingdom...

Peter can't even finish his sermon before the Holy Spirit interrupts him with a demonstration of God's activity...well beyond the solid fences that had been constructed.

WOW...WOW!!! What a story!!!

Luke seems bent on telling how the mission of God in the world is a movement from a centered set mentality to an understanding that God's mission is active and vibrant on the periphery...

So...salvation and belonging to God... is not just for one faith community,

...not just for one tribe... or nation,

...not just for one racial...or ethnic...or cultural...or socio/economic...or denominational group...

I know... we say we believe this... Do we have the courage to practice it...?

My encounter with The Good Shepherd in the sheep pen has impacted the practice of my faith ever since...

So, I wonder....

Do **you** ever feel compelled by the Spirit to leave the safety of centered set belief and practice...to join God in extending peace, healing and hope on the periphery??? It seems easy to forget that the periphery is not necessarily miles from here...it could be within this community...within our own neighborhood...

Peter got pushed out of his comfort zone to the periphery of his faith perspective as he cultivated a vibrant spirituality that embraced God's mission in the world...

For him it was about following God and God's activity and not so much about making issue statements...

Might prayer be a part of what it takes to get us to this posture, this place...?

I wonder what difference it would make if we all embraced a personal passion like the following:

By God's grace and the empowering Holy Spirit, I will tend God's mission by joyfully following Jesus, cultivating a vibrant spirituality that engages the world with God's love, and by empowering others to be active in this mission...