

3rd Easter - 4/18/10 – Acts 10:34-43; Matt 15:21-28 – Unreasonable Grace

In her story, “The Whisper Test,” Mary Ann Bird relates that she grew up knowing she was different, and she hated it. Mary was born with a cleft palate. She would hear the jokes and tolerate the stares of other children – some cruel, others simply curious – who teased her about her misshapen lip, crooked nose, and garbled speech. Mary grew up hating the fact that she was different. She was convinced that no one outside her family could ever love her, that is, until she entered Mrs. Leonard’s class. Mrs. Leonard had a warm smile, a round face, and shiny brown hair. In the 1950s, teachers would administer an annual hearing test. In addition to her cleft palate, Mary was able to hear out of only one ear. Determined not to give classmates another reason to tease her, each year she would cheat on the hearing test. It was called the whisper test. The teacher would stand one to two feet behind the student so that the child could not read the teacher’s lips. The student would place one finger on the opposite ear to obscure any sound. The teacher would whisper toward the student’s ear. The student would repeat the phrase to the teacher. When Mary turned her bad ear toward her teacher, she always pretended to cover her good ear. Mary knew teachers would typically say, “The sky is blue” or “What color are your shoes?” But not on this particular day. Mrs. Leonard changed Mary’s life forever. When the whisper test came, the child heard these words: “Mary, I wish you were my little girl.”

Unreasonable grace doesn’t make sense. I’m sure little Mary wondered why anyone would want her for a child. Unreasonable grace stops us cold because we aren’t expecting it or looking for it. Such is the situation we find in the two lessons before us today.

In many ways the 10th chapter of Acts is a play with 7 scenes. The scenes move back and forth between Cornelius and Peter. But God is the prime character in each of the scenes, the moving force in the background whispering something in Cornelius’ and Peter’s ears. In Scene 1, God comes first to Cornelius and begins the process of opening the community of salvation to the Gentiles. In Scene 2, Peter discovers that his Miss Manners Etiquette book doesn’t work for God’s party. God has thrown out the book! Whatever God makes is good! Humans aren’t to make judgments about what God creates. Scene 3 is interesting. The messengers from Cornelius arrive. Peter is directed by the Spirit to accompany them “without hesitation.” That phrase is better rendered “without discrimination” or “without making a distinction.” Peter extends hospitality to Gentile outsiders and in doing so he blurs the line between insiders and outsiders. This is a huge step for Peter. For a Jew, it is unreasonable.

Scene 4 finds Peter encountering Cornelius and discovering that, as human beings, both are equals before God. Peter’s associating with Gentiles without discrimination was a breach of Jewish Law. Scene 5 is where the light goes off in Peter’s head. “I perceive that God shows no partiality.” For centuries Jews believed that as judge, God showed no favoritism. Yet they viewed themselves as God’s favorites. What is new is this: Entrance into God’s Kingdom does not depend on one’s pedigree but on faith, obedience, and the practice of justice and mercy as proclaimed by Jesus. Scene 6 is the explosion of mistaken notions about God. The Holy Spirit descends on “all who heard the word.” This was totally unexpected! God’s grace is unreasonable! It defies human conventions! Now Peter accepts the hospitality of these Gentiles and stays with them. We cannot share the good news of Christ’s love with others and not associate with them. Love is more than a handshake and hello. Love enters into the life of the other person and loves that person as he or she is. Scene 7 is the Jerusalem Church’s reaction to Peter and their eventual acceptance of outsiders into the circle of God’s love.

Peter and like-minded Jews thought that their mission was only to the Jews and those like themselves. After all, Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, “It’s not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” But she had not taken his “No” for an answer. Rather, she replied, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the scraps thrown from the children’s table.” God’s grace is unreasonable! This woman heard God whispering in her ear: “You are my child!” She heard and believed, and her life was changed forever.

So where do these texts intersect our lives? Where does God’s unreasonable grace come to us and, like Peter and Cornelius, lead us to embrace those we judge to be outside God’s grace? Who are our cleft palate people, the ones we discriminate against? Who are the ones to whom God is sending us, much against our will? The

message of salvation is for everyone. Jesus died and rose for everyone. Everyone is welcome around God's table of grace. God knows no barriers, borders or boundaries. God recognizes no labels, degrees, or accomplishments. We are all children of God! This is what we need to be whispering into the ears of those who are struggling with life and see themselves as different, unlovable, with nothing to contribute. "You are God's child. God loves you." I want to invite you to be unreasonable this week and look for opportunities to whisper into someone's ear those very words. God is the moving force in the background whispering in our ears and using us to whisper into the ears of others, that both we and they might experience God's all inclusive love. This is how God's message of salvation is spread. When one person shares with another God's unreasonable and unlimited grace, the church grows. Go and tell what you've heard and experienced!