

Aliens Incorporated!

sermon digest

May 4, 2014

Acts 13:26-39

larry dipboye

A decade ago when we formed a congregation, we made a conscious decision to be a covenant community formed by the promises we make to God and to one another. Thus, one of our first tasks as church was to produce a covenant in meaningful language that clearly describes who we are, to come together in conversation and understanding of our priorities, to symbolize our commitment to God and to one another through affirming our statement of faith, and then to reaffirm our covenant annually to keep the center of our faith in focus. One sentence in “Grace Covenant” stimulated significant conversation when it was presented; it has continued to be a subject of major concern throughout our decade together: *“We are an inclusive fellowship, welcoming all persons without regard to the outward distinctions by which the world separates, classifies, and discriminates.”*

Having grown out of the racially segregated South, the world of my youth where church often revolved around language of exclusion, the most radical Christian revolution in my faith has been the discovery of this inclusive view of the world of people. The revelation that an inclusive community is rooted in the New Testament view of Christ was basic to my educational pilgrimage. Finally I have been shocked by life encounters with a shrinking world of people and a constantly expanding view of the gospel. Truly the church must be a community that welcomes all people without regard to the world’s outward distinctions.

Periodically I have a fantasy about being sixteen years old again and suddenly lifted out of my comfortable Southern context to be dropped into today. I cannot really imagine the astonishment that I would have experienced at seeing myself in this church one week ago in a room filled with African-American Christians, who were clearly our brothers and sisters in faith. That fantasy has caused me to sympathize with folks who form our congregation.

The Christian story is an outward movement toward “the ends of the earth.” I find the same kind of culture shock in the story of Acts that I have experienced in my Christian journey. The church began with a handful of disciples in Jerusalem with the commission of the risen Christ to be witnesses to the world of their experience with the Christ. This Jewish-Christian sect with roots firmly anchored in the idea that they were the chosen people of God was shaken to the foundations by the universal implications of the gospel. Like my growing up experience, they found that they could not live in the small cell of an exclusive faith and follow Jesus at the same time. As they moved out into the Roman, gentile world, they discovered that God was out in front, ahead of every step forward. The message of a God who loves the world in the story of Jesus was met by a hunger for hope in the larger world.

The crisis event came in Acts 10 with the conversion of a Roman Centurion, a soldier in Caesar’s army, and Peter’s struggle with his tradition of exclusion that denied the possibility of finding God in the life of a gentile. But the story is clear in attributing the conversion of Cornelius to the work of the Holy Spirit, not to Peter’s charismatic preaching or winning personality. Peter comes lately to provide guidance, understanding, baptism, and community.

Then Saul, AKA Paul, and Barnabas are commissioned by the church in Antioch of Syria to venture out of Jewish territory with the gospel of Christ. After a long journey they came to another Antioch, in Pisidia, today’s Turkey, where Paul preached his first big sermon of record. The sermon was delivered in the synagogue, addressed to a mixed audience of Jews, “descendants of Abraham’s family,” and “others who fear God.” No one knows with any certainty who is included in the “others who fear God” category; but we might assume that they were gentile residents of Antioch present in the synagogue as religious seekers. They may have been Jewish converts, proselytes from gentile pagan culture. The sermon contained the essential story of Jesus centered on God’s act of raising Jesus from death. Like the typical sermons in Acts, it was an Easter sermon. In Greek *kerygma*, the “proclamation” is a stock message containing the story of Jesus that began with Peter at Pentecost. Paul proclaims the *kerygma* with a slightly different twist. Paul proclaimed: “by this Jesus ***everyone who believes*** is set free from all those sins from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses (13:39).” Easter seems to have been the event that broke through the wall separating Jews from Gentiles releasing the good news of a universal salvation. To both Jews and Gentiles, Paul proclaimed the *kerygma* that through faith in Jesus alien gentiles can be incorporated into the body of Christ.

The venture of Paul and Barnabas came full circle when they arrived back in Antioch of Syria where they began their journey. In their report to the church, they “related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles (14:28).” Both Peter’s experience with the conversion of Cornelius and the discovery of an “open door of faith for the Gentiles” by Paul and Barnabas, led to the Jerusalem conference (chapter 15) in which the apostles and elders met together to reach an official decision to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit, “we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God.”

Are we there yet? Shortly after we moved to Oak Ridge, we set out on a journey with our two adult children to cover the territory involved in their growing up, a family visit to Texas. If you have not made the trip, you need to know that it is neither short nor easy. In the days when the children were small, we typically set out at 4:00 AM, drove all day, and arrived to join family with dinner at 7:00 PM. The trip usually started out with sleep, followed by the adventure of travel, but ended in frustration and pain with the long day of confined space. So when we set out to cover the trail we had been over many times in their childhood, about an hour down the road I heard a familiar voice from the back of the vehicle, “Are we there yet?”

The church family keeps on raising the same question. How far does God expect us to go as church in this move toward unfamiliar people and places to reach the “ends of the earth”?

If you are a biblical literalist, you might just stop with the gentile world. After all, that does include all of us. We gentiles are no longer the minority sitting on the sidelines wishing to be included in the family of faith. In most times and places, we alien gentiles have become the majority. Unfortunately, this Jew-Gentile division in the New Testament became the basis for reverse discrimination in later Christian history. When the church took in the gentile world and took on the appearance of the Roman center of authority, the Jews became the whipping boy on whom to blame the crucifixion of Christ and any other sins of record.

Anti-Semitism came to a head in Hitler’s Germany. Religion professor Pamela Hedrick declared, “The attempted extermination of European Jews before and during World War II has provided the greatest challenge to Christian theology since the failure of Jesus to return shortly after his ascension” (*Interpretation*, July 2012, p. 294). Unfortunately, the Anti-Semitism of Germany was not unfamiliar to people on our side of the Atlantic.

Shortly after we moved to Louisville in 1974, the federal court addressed the problem of public school segregation in our city. The city and county schools were merged into one system, and racial quotas were maintained by sending children by school bus across town to somewhat distant communities. The first weeks of school that year were chaotic. Some people in the mostly white suburbs were angry. Public demonstrations, calls for boycotts, and violence erupted on the streets. I decided to preach a series of sermons to address our problem. I found the basis for calling Christians to peaceful school integration in Acts, in the passages I have noted today, in references to the God who knows no partiality. What applied to gentiles in the first century definitely applied to race in the twentieth.

I had reached the ends of the earth. Surely the gospel would not lead us to include anyone else in the community of faith. But as churches began to examine their practice of discrimination against the minority of neighbors with a different sexual orientation, I found the same gospel applies. An article in *Interpretation* suggested taking the principles of dialogue and decision in the church in the Jerusalem Conference of Acts 15 to apply to the questions of sexual difference among Christians.

Several years ago Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner applied the principle to the world of religions. He developed a category of “Anonymous Christians” to describe people outside of his Church and outside the Christian faith who demonstrate in their attitudes and practices the Spirit of God we identify with the Spirit of Christ. I think of Mahatma Gandhi, an Indian Hindu by culture and religion, but one of the primary influences on Martin Luther King, Jr. Gandhi admired the teachings of Jesus and did more to exemplify the Spirit of Christ than most of his British “Christian” opponents.

I almost started this message with addressing you as “fellow aliens.” All of us are gentiles by origin, whom Paul describes in Ephesians 2:12 as “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise.” But we have been incorporated, formed as one people, one body, the

Body of Christ, the church. We are aliens incorporated. If the door of the church is open for us, we cannot and should not draw the line and say, "here is the 'ends of the earth'; here is the limit to God's grace and inclusion." We might even learn to say with Paul, "everyone who believes is set free."