

Sermon for Sunday, May 19, 2019

“Following the Leader”

A few weeks ago, I came across a podcast called choiceology and an episode they produced called “Knew it all along”. In the episode professors and historians discussed an idea called hindsight bias; which they defined as quote: “something you would have found confusing or unknowable in foresight which suddenly seems obvious in hindsight.” This idea caught my attention because, while there are true surprises in life which we would all say we could never have predicted—like Maximum security being disqualified and Country House winning the Kentucky Derby, or the Blues losing a game due to hand pass violation—there are other stories where, once we know the ending we claim that we could have predicted the outcome. I know that I do this quite a bit when reading history--there can be a sense of “well of course that’s what happened.” But we only feel that way because we have the benefit of looking back on events, knowing how things end. We forget or are never told the details of decisions which were made, or the decisions which should have been made and never were. Instead, we learn the outcomes of events and assume that’s the way it had to happen.

The book of Acts tells the incredible story of the Early Church—and it can be easy to read these stories through the lens of hindsight bias—believing that “of course, that’s the way it had to happen”, but if we can suspend our assumptions of inevitability for just a few minutes—these stories can offer us fresh perspective on how the resurrection calls us to live differently after the surprise of Easter morning.

In the first chapter of Acts—the author recounts the story of the Ascension—where right before the disciples eyes, Jesus was lifted up into heaven. Suddenly—the disciples were left with a lot of questions: now what? How were they supposed to carry on the message? Was Jesus gone permanently? Was he coming back tomorrow? Were they really in charge of decision making?? With more questions than answers the disciples went back to Jerusalem. And while they were all together, suddenly “divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

Acts chapters 3 through 9, are filled with stories of how, empowered by the Holy Spirit, the disciples began teaching in the temple and healing people in the name of Jesus—we hear about how the small band of disciples grew, and grew and grew and how their community shared meals together, we hear stories about persecution, jail breaks, and the conversion of Saul. But in chapter 10, there’s a shift, we hear the story of Peter having a vision after which he was invited to go to the home of a gentile man named Cornelius, who, along with his whole household, receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This brings us to Acts 11—Where, Peter has traveled to Jerusalem and when he arrives, he isn’t met with the warmest greeting—instead he has to go before fellow church leaders and defend why he chose to eat with “uncircumcised men” or gentiles. This may seem odd, but if we go back, and look closely at the first part of Acts, it’s clear that the early church was founded in the temple, the disciples, apostles and those who were part of the community who followed Jesus, they all kept the laws of Moses—including eating a kosher diet. So Peter had to go stand before the other church leaders and explain what was going on—why had he been in the home of a gentile?

Peter explained that in his vision he saw “something like a sheet coming down from heaven, and on the sheet there were animals, reptiles, and all the things that were considered “unclean” and forbidden to eat. While seeing all these things he was forbidden to eat, he heard a voice which said “Get up Peter; kill and eat”. Being a good pious, religious law-abiding man, he said “no! nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth!” the voice came a second time “what God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

What I love about this story, is that Peter didn't only have this vision once, or twice but three times. Three times he watched this unfold...the text doesn't say that Peter said the same thing each time—but I wonder if he did...I wonder if he thought of this like a test—one that he knew the answer for and he was going to pass! But Peter woke of from the vision and suddenly three men were at his door, asking him to go with them. And we don't know how but the text says that the Spirit told Peter to go with them and not to make a distinction between them (the gentiles) and us (the Jews). This was a big deal. To enter into a Gentiles home was to become ritually impure. And yet Peter trusted what he believed was the Spirit's guidance and went with them.

When Peter arrived at Cornelius' home, he learns that Cornelius, like Peter, had had a vision too—only in his vision an angel told him to “send people to Joppa where they would find a man named Simon Peter—who could share with them good news.” On hearing Cornelius' vision, Peter then started speaking—as he spoke, the Holy Spirit “fell upon them just as it had upon the disciples at the beginning.” When Peter saw what was happening he remembered Jesus words “John Baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

This was an important moment in the early church. It's known as the second Pentecost—the second because the Holy Spirit first fell on the disciples in Acts chapter 2, but now, in the home of Cornelius, a gentile, Peter witnessed something, which up until this point, was completely unexpected - God's Spirit was falling on those who were considered to be “outside” the faith. We have to suspend what we know at this point and stop ourselves from seeing the ending... Imagine being Peter—Jesus had been his Rabbi, Peter had walked alongside Jesus for three years—he had attended temple and celebrated the Passover with him, he had watched Jesus argue with the Pharisees and listened to his parables. Sure, Jesus had spoken to a Samaritan woman, and yes Jesus ate with sinners and tax collectors, but a Gentile, that was a whole new ball game...

I wish we had more of what Peter was thinking and the internal wrestling he had—or maybe he saw the Holy Spirit's presence and knew right away—but either way, Peter's response to what he witnessed in Cornelius' home was to say “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” We're told that when the believers who had questioned Peter heard this, they were at first silenced, but then praised God and recognized “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

This story smashes what we think we know about who is in and who is out of God's kingdom. Peter along with the first believers had an expectation—they believed that the message which they had received through Jesus Christ was meant only for those who were in their tradition. But suddenly the Spirit showed up in a way they could recognized but in a place they never imagined possible. And they were faced with the question—would they follow? Would they follow as God moved outside of their comfort zone? Would they follow as God welcomed people they didn't always understand or maybe even see eye to eye with? Would they follow as God expanded the kin-dom to include a culture that was so different than their own?

Like Peter and Cornelius and all those believers before us, we are faced with the same question; will we follow where God leads us? Even when it smashes our expectations of who is in and who is out? Will we follow when it makes us uncomfortable and challenges what we are so sure we know? Will we follow when it means things may look different than we ever expected? Because the good news is that through Jesus Christ, God is at work in our world breaking down every barrier that attempts to divide us from God and from each other—and we are invited to be a part of that work—because when we are—we are proclaiming the good news that nothing, not even death itself can separate us from God's love. So the same question that was asked of the early church is asked of you and me—will we follow where the Spirit leads? In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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