

“Across the Great Divides”

Acts 10:1-48

1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon

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I. Introduction

The note to Captain Meriwether Lewis from President Thomas Jefferson read: “The object of your mission is to explore the Missouri River, and such principal streams of it, as by its course and communication with the waters of the Pacific Ocean, which may offer the most direct and practicable water communication across this continent for the purposes of commerce.” Translation: Start in the Missouri River and find a water route to the Pacific Ocean. We’ll use it for business.”

The year was 1804, one year after the Louisiana Purchase. Lewis and Clark and the Corp of Discovery were sent west by Jefferson. It was believed that the Pacific Ocean was not that far. And it was believed that the tributaries of the Missouri River should take you there. So all you needed to do is paddle. Their job was to find a transcontinental waterway and map the course.

Before long, however, they discovered it was further than believed. And more importantly, paddling a canoe was NOT going to do it. What stood between them and the Pacific were the Rocky Mountains, the highest mountain range they had ever seen. They had only prepared to cross via water. Now they had to improvise. It was a great divide. And it would take a lot more work and time and commitment.

A great divide. It also became a metaphor for the great divides between people. There was a great divide called the Civil War between the North and the South. There was a great divide between the incredibly wealthy of the gilded age of the late 19th C and immigrants working in factories. There was a great divide called “the Cold War” between the capitalist West and the communist East. And today there is a great divide between the Republican right and the Democratic left.

II. Text and Exegesis

When I began to think about the biblical text in Acts 10, the metaphor of a great divide came to mind. And this great divide was between Jews and gentiles, who are everyone else. The Jews were a very small minority defined by race, culture, and religion in the vast Roman Empire. And to maintain their identity they tightly clung to what made them Jewish. To compromise would mean the gradual disappearance of their particular race, culture, and religion.

And religion to 1st C Jews was a big deal. They believed in one God, Yahweh. And they believed their God was the only God. And furthermore, this God had chosen them to be the people of God. So religion was not just about belief, it was also about identity and survival. And so they remembered and told and retold the stories of their people, stories about Abraham, Moses, Jacob, Joseph, King David and Elijah.

The beginning of the 1st C Church was a Jewish religious movement. The first Christians were Jews who believed Jesus was the Jewish Messiah for whom they had been waiting. His life, ministry, death, and resurrection proved that he was the Messiah. So the beginning of ministry and mission meant inviting Jews to believe. No one else. Just Jews. So it fit within the tight definition of Jewish race, religion, and culture.

But then strange things began to happen. When the Jewish Christians were persecuted by the conservative Jewish leadership in Jerusalem, they fled to other towns and cities. And they began to share about Jesus with non-Jews. And the non-Jews believed. In Acts we get the stories of Philip sharing about Jesus with the Samaritans and an official from Ethiopia. And they believed. So the question began to be asked, “Do you have to be Jewish to follow Jesus?” The spreading of belief in Jesus brought the early Church face to face with the great divide between Jewish culture, race, and religion and everyone else. And the divide was as vast and high as the Rocky Mountains were to Lewis and Clark.

So how did Christianity cross this great divide between Jews and everyone else? Acts 10 tells the story. It’s the longest story in Acts. And some biblical commentators argue it is, therefore, the most important story in Acts. To understand its importance, we need to hear the whole story. That’s why the whole story was read and summarized this morning.

Here’s a few important points in the story:

The characters matter. Cornelius is a commander in the Roman army. And he is a “God-fearer,” which means he believes in the Jewish God Yahweh. But he is clearly not Jewish. Peter is the leader of the early Church. He was raised a strict Jew. He was a leader among Jesus’ disciples. He has become the leader of the Christian mission to the Jews.

The place and power of the Holy Spirit matters. This crossing of the great divide between Jews and everyone else was not someone’s great idea. It was not worked out in a committee. It was not approved by a mission team. Rather, the story tells of the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes to Cornelius in a vision. The Holy Spirit comes to Peter in a vision. The message in both visions challenged the great divide. And the Holy Spirit falls on Cornelius and other non-Jews listening to Peter’s sermon. This is a type of divine approval that the great divide is to be crossed.

Faithfulness also matters. Cornelius acts on his vision. Peter ponders his vision. And then Peter has the trust and courage to also act on his vision and go to Cornelius’ house, which Jews would never do. Peter tells Cornelius and those with him about Jesus. And then when

Peter sees that these non-Jews have received the Holy Spirit just like the Jewish Christians, he announces they should be baptized. Baptism was a sign of membership in the Church. The great divide had been crossed. It's like Lewis and Clark finally arriving at the Pacific Ocean.

And finally, a more progressive theology grounded in the fundamentals of Jesus Christ matters. Jesus' ministry was to the Jewish people. He believed himself to be the promised Messiah for the Jewish people. He believed he was bringing the kingdom of God for the Jewish people. And clearly, Jesus was Jewish.

But here and there were hints of God's plan for more. Jesus regularly reached out to the outcasts and sinners beyond normal religious life. He occasionally healed people who were not Jewish. He told parables about the grace of God spilling over narrow definitions of salvation. He preached and lived "for God so loves the world," which includes all of creation, including all people. Jesus was about something bigger than the narrow theology of Jewish race, culture, and religion.

And so those fundamentals of Jesus' mission and work are carried forward in the Church. And there's a type of progression or evolution of those fundamental beliefs. To use our 1st Church vision statement, there's more interest in living into the "deep well of God's grace" than building "fences" to keep people out.

Grounded in the fundamentals of Jesus Christ, led by the Holy Spirit, the mission of the Church crosses the great divide. A new vision of what it is to be followers of Jesus Christ and the Church begins to take shape. The church is evolving into the great dream of God; "Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world."

III. Brief Theological Reflection

So did things go forward smoothly? Nope. Not at all! It was a mess. There were theological conflicts, fights, divisions, broken relationships, self-righteous judgmentalism, church splits, and much more. And so it is up until today. The great divide is still a challenge to cross. It's much easier to stay in our hometowns of sameness. But crossing the great divide is the dream of God.

And, of course, the great divide is not just between more conservative and more liberal Christians, or between different religions. It is between different races and cultures and world views. We see it all around us today. We are told to huddle in our silos of "like minded" and "like looking" people, while fearing and fighting against those who are different. But I believe the Church is to be better than that. We are called by God to be like Cornelius and Peter and cross the great divides.

The story in Acts 10 reminded me of an ad on television. We've seen the ad before. It's about 10 years old. I think it comes out of Canada. It's called "Eating Together." But I think it's

so good it's worth seeing every once in a while. Look for how the ad addresses crossing great divides.

(*Digital projection>play “EatTogether commercial” 2017, YouTube, 2:31)

Eating together; it crossed the great divides of difference and isolation and fear. And the last older guy in the ad who comes to the dinner appears to bring bread and wine, a hint of communion. There's something deeply religious going on here. There's something deeply of God.

It is the dream of God for the people God loves; cross the great divides.