

Text: Acts 11: 1-18  
Title: Resurrection Ripples  
Date: 05.02.10  
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I may have mentioned that I went to Israel ~ it no longer seems all that recently.  
One lasting impression: Israel is not a very big place.

Israel is about the size of New Jersey; it would fit inside of Lake Michigan. From stem to stern Israel is 290 miles and only 85 miles across at its widest point. Huge areas of Israel are uninhabitable hard scrabble desert, occupied only by Bedouins shaking their fists defiantly at the hot sun, scorched soil, and a desert winds. The land where the bulk of the population lives is comparatively smaller.

The corner of Israel where Jesus lived and worked is even smaller. The cluster of villages on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee is walk-able in a morning and you would still have time to ride your bike around the lake with the rest of the day. Capernaum and Nazareth were little back water villages. It is only about 90 miles from Galilee to Jerusalem. All told, Jesus maybe only traveled a couple of hundred miles. Our kids travel to every corner of the creation; the Savior of the World never saw much more than the smallest fraction of the world.

It's an important point, for God entered the world in Jesus like a tiny pebble tossed into a slate gray expanse of ocean. There was the smallest splash, almost imperceptible from a distance, but that splash released faint ripples that moved out in concentric circles reaching farther and farther toward horizon and shore.

Our text this morning is the story of one of those ripples.  
Our text this morning finds Peter riding the crest of a ripple.  
Our text this morning is about those ripples reaching farthest horizon and shore.

The early church understood itself as an extension of Judaism. Jesus was the fulfillment of the promises of their faith. They were not ecclesiastical entrepreneurs starting a new enterprise; they were Jews following their Messiah. Therefore, one of the first debates of the early church was about Jewish believers, Gentiles converts, and Torah/law. The first debates were about how far the ripples reached.

Peter is called on the carpet because he overstepped the bounds of Jewish law. The dietary laws were not a flimsy formality but were crucial to identity. They were part of determining who was in and who was out. So, when Peter traveled with, stayed with, ate with, and baptized a Roman soldier ~ he was outside the pale of possibility. He was out on a limb beyond the limits.

The premise was that the good news of Jesus was for the Jews, and it may even reach those Jews living in faraway lands, but Peter's questioners couldn't abide with the ripples of grace flowing over Gentiles. There had to be boundaries. Peter is criticized for crossing boundaries.

But, Peter can only recount the movement of the Spirit.

The Spirit prompted the soldier to seek him.

The Spirit prodded him with a vision.

The Spirit poked him to go with them.

The Spirit pushed the ripples further than they thought.

The Spirit was poured out on an outsider.

Blustery and befuddled, Peter's defense is that he followed the Spirit. As the story is told in Acts 10 Peter was unsure of what to do. He knew he was on shaky ground, but he was prodded by the Spirit and shaped by a vision from heaven. This was not the rising of confident evangelical fervor or missionary zeal; this was the surprise of grace. This was about finding God already there and playing catch up. All Peter offered was an openness and willingness to travel with, eat with, and stay with the outsider. All Peter did was follow the Spirit....

Dear friends, we set boundaries in this world. We divide ourselves by kith and kin, by class and clan, by family and faith. We are categorized by nationality and ethnicity, by denominations and political allegiance. We set standards and live with the affiliations of

those who are insiders and those who are outsiders,

those who are members and those who are visitors,

those who belong and those who don't fit,

those who are legal and those who are illegal,

those who are Jets and those who are Sharks.

And, we have to set some boundaries ~ right? The very nature of our endeavor together demands some boundaries ~ right? We gather to confess that Jesus is Lord, not just a really nice guy. We gather to wrestle with and submit to scripture, not just read for sublime language and modest suggestion. We gather to turn our attention toward God, not just divert our attention from the daily grind. So, we profess our faith,

confess our sins,

sing our hymns,

recite our creeds,

read our scripture,

stand in the deep waters of a particular theological tradition,

root our kids in a soil that grows-up faith.

And, in doing so, we set and secure our identity in the wide world of people and propositions.

We mark our boundaries and set the limits that define who we are.

But, in the words of William Willimon,

*...to be faithful to the gospel, there is this prodding, this incessant prodding, which pushes beyond our limits. There is this nagging voice (called the Holy Spirit?) always whispering in our ear, "Are these stated limits your limits or are they God's limits?"*

There is an undercurrent in scripture that always seems to flow beyond the boundaries of ethnicity and religious confidence toward those on the outside. There is some holy spirit that keeps pushing the territory of God's blessing beyond the parameters that people set. There is

language and imagery in scripture that is clearly universal and all encompassing in scope. And, there is something in God's will for creation that is not static ~ it is always moving and always making new and always reaching beyond where we're comfortable.

Maybe our boundaries aren't God's boundaries.

Maybe the ripples of the resurrection reach beyond all that we can ask or imagine.

I sent a copy of a book I appreciated to a friend. The book is entitled: If Grace is True: Why God will Save Every Person. My friend had the book sitting on a table in the living room. In a flurry of cleaning before his Baptist parents-in-law came for a visit he enlisted his son's help. With three active boys, there were loose shoes to find, crushed Cheetos to vacuum, and clutter to pick up. My friend saw the book and said, "I better put that away. I don't want Grandma and Grandpa to see it." He was just trying save Thanksgiving dinner by avoiding a theological debate. But, his son stopped and said, "If Grace is True: Why God will Save Every Person..... What's wrong with that, dad?"

What's wrong with that is that the ripples have to stop somewhere. God can't save everybody. Our confessional standards affirm the reality of limits to God's saving action. Scripture may be clear about the universal scope of salvation, but it is also clear about judgment and damnation and hell. What's wrong with that is that there has to be boundaries marked and a score kept ~ even with grace. There has to be limits. Doesn't there?

The story of the Acts of the Apostles is that the Spirit of God keeps moving out. The circle is small with Jesus. The circle is wider with Peter. The circle is even wider with Paul. The ripples of the resurrection keep rolling outward that no barrier or boundary can restrain.

And, I don't have that worked out. I go too far out and the footing gets all loose and liberal and it makes us nervous.

But, my heart's desire is to follow Peter in following the movement of the Spirit and to proclaim that the ripples of the resurrection will not be deterred. To announce that the table is set for all who would come. To trust that as God in Jesus would enter this world, every corner ~ no matter how dark and broken ~ would finally and fully be made new, whole, and bathed in light.

In the words of Peter:

*So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?*

Dear friends, may we let the Spirit push us beyond the boundaries of confession.

May we ride the crest of a ripple that kept rolling out.

May we live in way that all would be insiders.

And, if we don't know any outsiders, then maybe with Peter we need to move....

May we follow the Spirit in that too.

May God pull us, even kicking and screaming with our apostolic forefathers and foremothers, toward the wideness of God's mercy.

The last thing I was looking for in Israel was friends, but one lasting gift of that trip is a circle of friends. One of those friends, Tim Tutt, is a minister at a UCC church in Austin, Texas. A few weeks ago the church he serves celebrated their monthly jazz service ~ the music, the vibe, the liturgy, the spirit shaped by freedom and ripples of jazz. Before they celebrated communion the musicians played Cab Calloway, “Everybody Eats When They Come to My House.” It is wonderful, fun, be-bopping tune:

*Have a banana, Hannah,  
Try the salami, Tommy,  
Give with the gravy, Davy,  
Everybody eats when they come to my house!*

*Try a tomato, Plato,  
Here's cacciatore, Dorie,  
Taste the baloney, Tony,  
Everybody eats when they come to my house*

You get the idea ~ hardly befits the solemnity of the Eucharist ~ but God in Christ has set a table from heaven, full of the richest fare, and God has made a place for you, because “everybody eats when they come to my house.”

The resurrection ripples out and washes over you ~ insider and outsider.  
Come to the table ~ for who are we to stand in God’s way?

Amen.