

As a Christian, as a believer and follower of Jesus Christ, we never really know just when God is going to shake things up, and bring us to an unexpected and extraordinary experience. There is nothing better, or more satisfying than to realize that we are in-synch with God’s purpose and plan to participate in what God has been up to all along.

Recently someone got in contact with the church who had no prior connection to this congregation and were asking for something that would be logistically pretty challenging and inconvenient to provide... so when I got on the phone with them, I intended to explain that I had to turn their request down. But as I listened and we spoke together, I was surprised to hear me agreeing to help them... and as I think about it later, I am pretty sure that it was the Holy Spirit nudging me, a God-thing. And along the way, as I met and worked with the family, it became pretty clear that I was doing the ministry that God called and equipped me to do. What a satisfying, fulfilling and unexpected blessing it is when we find ourselves on track with God’s will and purpose... even when it goes against our own plans and inclinations... **for often times that seems to be where God likes to lurk & reveal the richest delights of Christian discipleship.**

The passage we read earlier from the book of Acts is really the conclusion of a much larger and grander story about the early church that began back in chapter 10. It’s around lunchtime, and Peter is up on the roof in prayer, and thinking about his hunger, when he falls into a trace, in which a picnic blanket descends from the sky, loaded with unclean and repulsive foods that no Jew would ever willingly eat ... and he hears a voice telling him, to get up, kill and eat.

vs. 10:14-16

But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” The voice said to him again, a second time, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” This happened three times.

For this story to make sense, we need to realize that this was about far more than just religious food laws, but was at the very heart and a distinguishing feature that symbolized and identified who the Jews understood themselves to be as the people of God. Next, this vision is clarified and set in context when servants sent from a Roman Centurion ask Peter to come with them to meet their master, Cornelius. Sometimes this story is called, the conversion of Cornelius, but more accurately, it’s about the transformation of Peter that led to the early Christian Church spreading beyond the assumptions and boundaries of traditional definitions and understandings about who they were, as the people of God... **so the vision was really less about food than it was about people.** Through his vision and unexpected experience, Peter was compelled to see that God thought and acted differently than his tradition ... and so he had to change, to be aligned with God. The assumption had always been that a person became a Jew first, then became a Christian within Jewish Law and community. But the lesson here was, that by grace anyone can be saved, because God’s mercy and grace is freely available to all, even to gentiles, who didn’t follow the dietary rules. **What Peter intended to reject and call profane, gentile-food, God had made clean, acceptable and welcome in Jesus Christ.** This story is all about **the theology of grace**, which is at the very heart of God’s purpose and plan. It’s about gracious love for the whole of human family, a picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd who came to bring the lost and wounded sheep home. The point is, it wasn’t Peter decided to bring gentiles into fellowship **but he was catching up with what God was already doing.** Peter was certainly not seeking or expecting a vision from God, that would change his life, alter the trajectory of the early Christian church, and get him in trouble with the leaders in Jerusalem. To the Council in Jerusalem, by eating with gentiles and inviting them into relationship with God Peter was abandoning the faith... for how could these gentiles, these outsiders possibly be equally loved and cherished by God? But Peter doesn’t try to defend or explain himself, he simply described what happened, what God had done,

vs. 15-17

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And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 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?"

This story is not really a break from Old Testament Scripture. It is the same lesson about God's grace and mercy as when God commanded Jonah to preach to the Ninevites. Like the leaders in Jerusalem, Jonah sailed off in the opposite direction because he didn't want them to repent and avoid the judgment of God; because Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire, a most brutal and bitter enemy of the nation Israel. God had called Israel to be a light to all other nations, but as Jonah demonstrates, they had gotten off-track, and distracted away from their true mission of God. And it was only after he had been eaten and vomited out by a really big fish, that was Jonah willing to obey God by preaching a very short, but effective, 8-word sermon.

vs. 3:4-5, 10~4:1

Jonah cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry.

Jonah couldn't stand that God's love, forgiveness and grace extended to Israel's unworthy-undeserving enemies... in fact Jonah complains to God that he'd rather die than see the people of Nineveh receive God's grace. Yes, Nineveh was evil and merciless, deserved divine judgment. Jonah sets up camp just outside of the city so he can enjoy watching the Lord destroy Israel's enemy, 120k people, who as it turns out, God loves... **for as it turns out, mercy and grace and what God does best!** That grace is a lot like manna given in the desert to the Israelites, that came in abundance each morning during their journey. So too, grace is given in abundance, all the grace we ever need; either you accept and receive God's grace, or you do not. Sometimes we forget that grace is entirely God's gift, it's God's love, always unearned and entirely undeserved. Like manna, grace is freely and fully given as promised; no one gets more, no one gets less, but abundance for all - regardless of the amount of our effort and labor, ... because it's something God accomplishes, not us.

Now everything about our world has taught us, is to work harder and longer to deserve greater rewards. We earn grades in school, badges in scouting, rank in the military and promotions in our jobs. BUT that's not how the kingdom of God operates, and that misses the point of God's gracious love, which is always entirely unearned and undeserved. Those who serve and work hard and long are especially vulnerable, because we may suppose God should be impressed by how wonderfully splendid and faithful we are. This wonderful grace that we so welcome and affirm for ourselves, sometimes, we'd like to deny for certain unsavory others – those we deem less worthy, or judge less deserving. These texts calls us to think & rethink about how we feel about grace especially toward those we see as unworthy or hopelessly lost, and we need to consider and acknowledge our own need. Grace can be a very difficult concept for us to accept; - For some, hard to believe that God really loves them, despite all the sin and wrong they have done. - For others, hard to believe that God really loves them, and not all influenced by all the good that they have done. Though it may offend us, or insult our self-righteous pride, we can actually do nothing ourselves, for our salvation, that was not – already freely given & accomplished by Jesus Christ... for other than responding when we were called ... other than letting ourselves be saved ----- really, there is nothing about our salvation for which we can boast or take any credit... any more than we could boast or take any of the credit that a fireman rescued us from a burning building; ... someone else did the work and the heavy lifting, for there is simply nothing more to be earned.

Ephesians 2:8-9

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For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

I may need to give up my sense of superiority & self-righteousness. It never does us any good to compare ourselves with others. And if I am going to hang with Jesus in a loving relationship, then accept that He will be inviting lots of other folks, many of whom, we would not think to invite on our own; but who are also truly precious and loved... even those undeserving who have already burned through several second chances. I also need to relax more and just enjoy the truth of God's love.

Our call is to serve with joy and fulfillment and pleasure-- -- not to be so driven to impress or earn God's gracious acceptance and not driven by fear, guilt or shame, or anything else. As Christians, we are called to dispense and reflect God's love, so we cannot let ourselves be offended by that grace, even when its freely given to the most undeserving. This world can be a very cruel, harsh and demanding place, very quick to judge and condemn, to exclude and reject, to accuse and assign motives, and very hesitant to forgive... **and surely the task of the church of Jesus Christ is to be, and to live out an alternative view, as a place of hope, healing and limitless grace.**

The question and challenge is: will I let it flow freely through me, and as a church, is that mission of God real and active among us?