

Simon Peter is an interesting character in the Bible. As I tried to get to know him through the stories we are told about him in the Bible, I began to realize how much Simon Peter is like many of us. Simon Peter is someone who was an ordinary hard working guy; he was a business owner who had his own fishing business. He was either married or he may have been widowed.

He sometimes had productive days when his business did well and made a profit and at other times things were tough and he struggled to pay his bills. Peter became very important to the ministry of Jesus. Jesus preached to others while standing in Peter's boat and it was Peter who was with Jesus when he was transfigured on a mountain. According to the gospel of John, it was Peter who ran to the empty tomb when Mary discovered that it was empty.

But we also discover that Peter worried about what people thought of him and this concern for appearance sometimes controlled his actions. When things got tough for Jesus in Jerusalem, it was Peter who denied that he knew him.

We also discover that Peter was prejudiced. But we can't stand here in judgment of Peter. He was, after all, a product of his culture. He was a product of a Jewish culture that was taught by their faith to maintain purity from foreigners. They were taught to distance themselves from others in order to keep their religion and faith pure from outside tarnish.

It made sense for good Jewish people like Peter to distrust people of different races and faiths. The Jewish people needed their independence in order to prosper.

But then we get to Acts 10. And Peter's whole worldview is turned upside down. There is no way to fully understand the impact of what happens to Peter unless we read the story found in Acts 10 and 11 together. It just doesn't work to just read an excerpt of this story. So, therefore, I am going to read this passage from Acts 10 and 11 to help us grasp the radicalness of this event.

In order to help us understand this narrative this morning, I am going to read from “The Message.” This interpretation is really a Biblical narrative.

Read Acts 10- 11:18 in the Message

In Peter’s life, the Holy Spirit came into his life and challenged him to change his attitude toward people of a different race. The Holy Spirit grabbed him, shook him up, and demanded from him that he change his views and to begin to share the good news with people outside of his Jewish family.

As we read this text of Scripture this morning, we are surrounded by national conversations about race. Just this week in Arizona, their state government passed a law that has led to a national conversation about illegal immigration and racial profiling. I noticed that on Friday of this week they passed an amendment to their initial law in an attempt to address concerns that the initial law was racist. In Britain, their Prime Minister Gordon Brown, is the topic of conversation after he called a woman a racist after she asked questions about immigration. Brown did not realize that he could be heard when he made the comment. Conversations about race and nationality make most of us very fearful.

But we in the Carolinas cannot cast stones toward Arizona and Britain. Our church is like most churches in which we don’t show a whole lot of diversity. We spend time with people that are a lot like us racially and economically. We get into our little comfortable communities with people that are like us.

And there are reasons we do this. It is comfortable. I don’t think it is necessarily sinful or racist or prejudiced. I just think we congregate with people like us because it is easy.

But into our comfortable world comes the story of Peter and Cornelius and a challenge to Peter's attitude toward people who are different. Into Peter's world comes the Holy Spirit who says to Peter, "Get out of your comfort zone."

Read section below of **Blood Done Sign My Name** from, p. 74-81 about a Southern white pastor in Sanford, NC who invites an African-American to preach at his church in 1964.

Dr. Proctor was not just any black preacher, either; he was one of the leading black educators in the country and one of the most prominent African American ministers of his generation. In the decades to come, Ivy League universities would pay thousands of dollars to have Dr. Samuel Proctor deliver their commencement addresses. In late 1963 and early 1964, however, Jonesboro Heights Methodist Church rocked on its foundations at the thought of having a black man in their pulpit. When church members began to hear about Dr. Proctor's proposed visit, the telephone started to ring incessantly. Fifty church members called a protest meeting in the fellowship hall and insisted that my father rescind the invitation. He was shocked at the outcry. "We are really having fireworks in our church concerning Dr. Proctor's coming," Mama scrawled in her diary. "I have hardly slept at all."

As the word filtered out into the community, Daddy began to receive a steady stream of death threats on the telephone. "I called the police station and told them that I wouldn't mind a bit if they would bring a squad car by the house every once in a while," my father recalled. "I really thought they were going to kill him," Mama said later.

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The day his parishioners held the protest meeting to oppose Daddy's invitation to Dr. Proctor was the worst day of all. He strode into the fellowship hall, all shoeshine and handshakes, confident that he'd walked into a hornet's nest. Daddy was stunned by the hostile reception and disappointed in his own performance. "Our faith is really being stretched," Mama wrote in her diary on January 31. "At the meeting tonight Vernon was hurt to the core. Several made terribly cutting remarks to him. He just took it, but afterwards shed tears." When Daddy came back to the house, there was more bad news.

"Things were just about as bad as they were going to get," Daddy recalled, thinking about that awful day, "and when I got home, someone had just called and said they were going to blow up my house and do harm to my children, and Martha was very much afraid." Daddy walked quickly upstairs, tears welling in his eyes, wondering what on earth he would do.

The segregationists put their own kind of squeeze on Daddy, though, and some of my father's supporters began to back off. The weak tea of moderation flowed freely and went like this: "Vernon might be right, but it isn't worth tearing the church apart over." At six o'clock the night before Dr. Proctor was scheduled to preach, Daddy called an emergency meeting of the church's administrative board in an effort to ease the controversy. It may have been a tactical error. Some of the board members angrily demanded that my father cancel Dr. Proctor's appearance the next morning. One of his adversaries kept pushing the telephone on the desk toward him, saying, "You can end all this with

one phone call.” Others began to ask Daddy why he thought this one service was really worth the painful breach that loomed in front of them. “This thing is going to tear this church apart,” one man insisted. Just as the meeting threatened to dissolve in an uproar, a quiet, dignified older woman rose to speak.

“Miss Amy” Womble was sixty, an “old-maid schoolteacher,” her neighbors would have said in those days. She walked with a limp. Miss Womble had been a first-grade teacher to most of the people in that room. The community honored her, but nobody had any idea what she thought about the burning social issues of the day. “I’ve been just sitting here sort of listening,” Miss Amy said. “And I hear one of us saying this is going to tear this church apart.” She looked directly at the man who had said it. “Now, I don’t know the man who is coming very much. I know he is the president of A & T, that’s all I know. But I know our pastor, and you know him, too, and he’s not going to tear anything apart. And I don’t suppose Dr. Proctor is going to tear anything apart, either. If there is going to be any tearing done, we’re going to do the tearing apart ourselves.”

Page 80-81 (after the service)

When I met him after church, Dr. Proctor squatted to shake my hand, looking me in the eye as if I were a man and a brother. “Beautiful Sunday.” Mama wrote that night. “The Lord has been with us. Had over 200 at church – good service. We are filled with God’s joy and peace. Several of the opposed were truly converted at church. Dr. Proctor ate lunch with us.” To get around the restaurant problem, we all enjoyed fried chicken and deviled eggs and all kinds of Methodist church dinner-on-the-grounds casseroles at Margie Mann’s house; Margie, one of my father’s favorite people, was not afraid of anything. All through lunch, I could not stop staring at this graceful brown-skinned man with the beautiful voice. He was almost as good as my daddy, I thought. In fact, he seemed a lot like my daddy, and that made me proud of both of them.

My father’s lay leader, a wholesale grocery salesman named Carl, had come into Daddy’s study in the middle of the controversy about Dr. Proctor. He’d been crying, too. It was that kind of year. When my father asked him why, he said, “I went to see one of my merchants this morning, and he said, ‘Carl, you go up there to that church, don’t you?’ I said, ‘Yeah, I go up there. I’m the lay leader.’ And he said, ‘Are you going to support your preacher having that nigger up there?’ And I said, ‘Yeah, I am going to support him.’ And that merchant told me to get the hell out of his store and never to set foot in there again.” Carl looked at my father and smiled through his tears. “Preacher,” he said, “I’ve heard all my life about witnessing, but until this morning I didn’t know a damn thing about it.”

So what is your comfort zone? What kind of people do you like to be around? What kind of people do you isolate yourself from? Is it people who are racially different? Economically different? Politically different? Well guess what, if we believe the Bible and if we believe that Acts 10 and 11 are true stories, then we are told that the good news of God’s love is not just for people that look like us and that have the same interests.

Our focus as Christians should not only be on people that look like us. That is easy to do. It is easy to welcome people to worship who are like us and who act like us. But the more faithful response based on Acts 10 and 11 is to reach out to people who are not like us.

Do we really want to see what the Holy Spirit is up to? Do we really want to be a spirit filled church? If we pay attention to Acts 10 and 11, then we will need to change what we look like. We need to have a wider representation of age. We will need a wider representation of ethnicity. We will need a wider representation of economic status.

If we are going to follow the Spirit of God, then it is probably the time for you and me to make a concerted effort to share the good news with all of God's children and not just the ones that look like us.

When we do, then we may know what witnessing is really all about. AMEN.

-Text: Acts 10 – 11:18

-Given: May 2, 2010 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)