

Faith: The Final Frontier ~ To Seek Out New Life and New Civilizations

This is the second in a series of sermons: a parody on the opening monologue of the popular TV series, "Star Trek". Last week's focus was "To explore strange, new worlds." Today's focus is, "**To Seek** New Life Forms and New Civilizations."

(ACTS 10:24-35 NRSV) *The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him. ²⁶But Peter made him get up, saying, "Stand up; I am only a mortal." ²⁷**And as** he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; ²⁸and he said to them, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. ²⁹**So when** I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?" ³⁰Cornelius replied, "Four days ago at this very hour, at three o'clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. ³¹He said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard **and your alms** have been remembered before God. ³²Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' ³³Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here **in the presence** of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say." ³⁴Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.*

This story may be Peter's finest hour. By Jewish law there were four ways one could become ceremonially unclean; forbidden to enter the temple until cleansing oneself. One way was to touch a Gentile. So, Peter was racist by official policy. But all that changed in today's text. "*I truly understand that God shows no partiality...*"

Watch it develop: a younger Simon—rough hands, sunbaked, smelling of fish and sweat, a vocabulary spiced with Tobasco; hard working, down-to-earth.

And he had an ego—grossly overestimated his own courage and loyalty. At the table Jesus said, "One of you will betray me." Peter—a bit buzzed from Passover wine: "Though they slay me, I'll never forsake you!"

Remember? Jesus said, "Before the rooster crows in the morning you'll deny three times that you even know me." And it was so. That night some dark ally in Jerusalem shook with the sobs of a disillusioned man.

The next time we see Peter he's still a broken man. "It was all a charade. I shoulda' never left my nets. ...lost three years of income, and for what?"

Then there's that beautiful story in John 21: fishing all night and catching nothing. "Cast your net on the right side of the boat..." So many fish they feared the boat would sink... And on the shore Jesus had prepared breakfast.

This story justifies the countless hours of conjugating verbs and declining nouns in Greek class. English fails us here.

In ancient Greek, eight separate words are translated, "love." Three of them are prominent in the New Testament: Eros is emotional, romantic attraction. Philos is sometimes called "brotherly love;" but it's more like, "I love those who agree with me; who are like I am." And then there's agape: self-giving, sacrificial love.

It's that third one Peter claimed to have for Jesus: "Though they slay me..."

And that morning, after an unsuccessful night fishing, Jesus asked, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than anybody else?" And the word is "agape."

Peter responded with the word, "phileo". "I love you as I would love a lodge brother. That's all I got." Integrity at last! Self-understanding. Self-acceptance! And that's what he offers.

And Jesus didn't pull him out of the ball game because he fumbled the ball. He said, "Feed my lambs." "If philos is all you've got, it's all I ask. There's a place for you in my kingdom. Feed my lambs."

The exchange is repeated a second and a third time; but the third time, Jesus asked, "Simon, do you phileo me?"

That's why, in the text, Peter was upset the third time: Jesus asked, "Do you even love me that much? You denied me three times, you ran away, you gave up and went back to fishing... Do you even phileo me?"

"Lord, you know everything. There are no illusions before you. I stand before you just as I am. I phileo you."

"There's a place for you in my kingdom. Feed me sheep."

And then it was Peter who preached the first Pentecost sermon—when Luke tells us 3,000 souls were added to the church! And then there's this fascinating story in Acts 10: our text for today.

Peter was at a friend's house in Joppa. He was napping, and dreamed of a sheet coming down from heaven, filled with all kinds of animals—big ol' Virginia ham, dripping with honey and cloves—and a voice said, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat."

And Peter responded, "No, I'm kosher. Nothing unclean has touched my lips."

And the voice said, "What I have called clean, don't you call unclean." And the sheet went back up into heaven.

Peter woke and looked around. Dinner smells from the kitchen. Peter dozed off again. Same dream, two more times: "Rise, Peter, kill and eat." "Nothing unclean has touched my lips." "What I have called clean, don't you call unclean."

His host awakens him. "Two Italian soldiers are asking for you." When Peter goes to the door, the soldiers say, "Our commander, Cornelius, is a God-fearing man. He wants you to come and tell him about Jesus."

And Peter went to Caesarea and witnessed, and the Holy Spirit came down—another Pentecost—and they hadn't even been baptized yet! And the story ends with Peter declaring: "God does not prefer one people over another."

I do not propose to suggest this congregation is plagued by racism; although I readily confess I still wrestle with the residue of growing up in a racist home. But racism is not the only form of prejudice we encounter. There are other life forms, other civilizations "out there."

Mark Buchanon shares an experience at the Tuesday night prayer meeting at Brooklyn Tabernacle. He says it felt like skydiving into a tornado, exhausting and exhilarating all at once: 3,500 God-hungry people storming heaven for two hours.

Afterward, he went to dinner with the pastor, Jim Cymbala. As they ate, Jim asked, 'Mark, do you know the number one sin of the church in America? It's not internet pornography; and it's not that the divorce rate in the church is roughly the same as society at large.

'It's that pastors and leaders are not on their knees crying out to God, **'Bring us** the drug-addicted, the prostitutes, the destitute, the gang leaders, those with AIDS; the people nobody else wants, whom only you can heal, and let us love them in your name until they are whole.'

Buchanon writes, "I had no response. I was undone. He had laid me bare, exposed my fraudulence. I had never prayed, not once, for God to bring such people to my church. So, I went home and began to cry out for "those nobody wanted."

"And darned if God didn't bring them. And then I found out why nobody wants them: they're messy and costly and dirty. They swear at you, lie to you, steal from you. Worse, they make you love them, and then break your heart."

People nobody else wants: **New Life** Forms and New Civilizations. I think of the pimps and the crackheads I encountered almost daily in Las Vegas.

So, why am I telling you all this? This is Conway, Arkansas. I've been here fifteen months and haven't encountered a single "crackhead." Most people I counsel struggle with issues that have minimal social consequences—and most of which could have been avoided.

But living within sight of this building are people nobody else wants. You know who they are. You know the names they're called. The political bullies love to point them out. If they are to be embraced and loved into wholeness, it will cost us something. And despite our best intentions and even our sincerest efforts, we benefit from a suppressed and generally denied caste system that keeps them where they are.

Kids, in your school there are people nobody wants, aren't there? You know

who they are. You know the names they're called. The school bullies love to make sure everybody knows who they are. Would your friends turn their backs on you if you reached out to make friends with these kids?

New Life Forms. New Civilizations. **Different**. Exactly the ones Jesus loved.

The story of Peter is for us who struggle with self-image and consistency. It's for us who struggle with limits of acceptance—issues of societal preference.

The story of Peter says first that God will not give up on us. It therefore also says we should never give up on ourselves, because God can take our feeblest efforts—even as we struggle with social preference—and make them into miracles of reconciliation and wholeness, in a fragmented world.