AN UNWELCOME GIFT
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Text: Acts 11:1–18

This wild passage is Peter’s answer to a pretty simple question. The believers in Judea wanted to know what in the world was going on. Peter was welcoming Gentiles into the way of Jesus. Gentiles. This was a Jewish movement, so what was this they were hearing about Gentiles?

They get this fantastic answer. Peter retells of all the events that are recorded in more detail in Chapter 10 of Acts. We have this strange vision of a blanket loaded with beasts of all kinds. We have voices from heaven, and then other people’s visions and the voices they heard. There is just a lot here that we won’t have time to explore—such as who were these three men who came to see him from Caesarea? And how did they find him in Joppa? And what about the six brothers, who were they?

It was a wild answer, but then again these were wild times in the early church. The Spirit was moving like a whirlwind, toppling over all the old norms and doing whatever it willed. Everything they thought they knew about being holy was being upended. Peter tried to explain, but there was really no rational explanation for the ways things were unfolding.

The scripture says that pretty clearly. After Peter unleashed this story, the passage reads, “When they heard this, they were silenced!” What could you say? You were either going to go along with Peter, or you were going to call for help.

So, they were silenced.

There was this pregnant moment. What would they do in the face of such wildness, such unorthodox visions? What would they do, hearing that God would not be contained in any system, any boundary, any protocol? What Peter was saying was messy, inconvenient and scary. They had to decide what they would do.

The next line gives us the answer. They praised God! Probably a good idea given the power of the Spirit that was on the move in those days. It says, “They praised God,” and then this whole wild and weird story comes to a close with their assessment of what it all meant. They proclaim: “God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

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A repentance that leads to life. Whoever heard of such a thing? We know about repentance, and “life” is not the word that comes to mind. Guilt, yes. Shame. We just came through the season of Lent, so we know about ashes and confession and the burden of sin. That’s what we know about repentance—that it drives us to our knees and makes us consider our failings and is no fun at all. What in the world is this repentance that leads to life?
I sat with that question for some time. At the core I think it is a personal question, and what surfaced for me was a very personal answer. Repentance is like that. If it is going to have integrity it has to get specific.

Some years ago I had been in a foul mood, the kind we all go through, but this one lasted a long time. The world seemed more annoying than it had been in the past. People more irritating. Clerks in the store were slower. Drivers less attentive. The man who brought the paper was more careless. My family was insensitive. My spouse, self-absorbed. The list went on.

I kept this rumbling irritation to myself for the most part, but it was a dialog I got addicted to—and I’d rehearse it with just a few friends, and of course with my spouse who bore the brunt of it.

Over coffee one day, one of my friends said, “You’ve gotten pretty judgmental.”

Remember that silence in the text when the apostles heard something that did not make sense? Me? Judgmental? That was the last thing I wanted to be, and the last thing I thought I was. I felt like Hillary felt when Bernie called her “unqualified.” I’d been called a lot of things, but judgmental was not one of them.

As I drove home, I got more and more furious. Here was just one more example. Even my friends didn’t get it. I’m a nice guy, right? I mean, c’mon, after all I’d done for people! I got home and told Mark the whole thing. “One of my friends called me judgmental,” I said. “Can you believe it?” To which he replied, “Well, actually, you have gotten kind of judgmental.”

I can laugh now, but those were painful words to hear. I felt as though I might lose consciousness. They came as a hot coal in my heart. I started my defense, and when I’m upset I can be pretty articulate, but I ran out of words. I saw with clarity that they were right. Ouch. I had become estranged from the person I knew myself to be—and I needed to make some changes.

I realized I was teetering on the brink of burn out, so I made a plan. I got help. I dove deeply into yoga. I changed my diet. I spent time every day in meditation and prayer. Little by little, I began to reconceive the way I was showing up in the world. Bit by bit, and over some months, the tenderness and joy and lightness and wonder I’d lost somewhere along the way began to come back to me.

It was a hard repentance, but it was a repentance that led to life.

Sometimes we need to hear a hard word, a word we don’t want to hear, and God loves us enough to send it to us. We realize that we have to turn from the way we are headed. At first we resist, but then it comes clear—we need to change. We wake up. We see a new path—and we want to take it. This is the way repentance comes as a gift.

It is personal, but the implications can also be communal. Sometimes the repentance is not only for ourselves, but for the systems in which we live. That was certainly true for the apostles. The repentance started in the hearts of people, but it changed the whole landscape: theologically, socially and politically.

Just one contemporary example of this: I remember vividly the first time I heard about global warming. I was at a retreat center in the Cascade Mountains in Washington, at Holden Village in 1990. A scientist spoke about concepts that were new to us. We heard about carbon emissions and fossil fuel dependence. We heard about how climate change was disturbing the migratory patterns of birds and melting the polar ice cap. It all seemed unbelievable—especially there in the wilderness with pristine creeks and snow-capped mountains. It was so easy to deny. Again, there was this silence as we considered, what will we do? What could we do?
I think we are still in that silence, some of us, on this Earth Sunday. Twenty-five years have passed since then—and still some political and religious leaders deny the scientific fact of global warming. Corporate interests tell us that doing what we need to do in order to save the earth will devastate our economy. Prophetic voices like James Hanson at Columbia University and environmental activist Bill McKibben call us to wake up, and yet too many still sleep while the earth warms, and the bees disappear, and the climate changes day by day.

We see it happening, and though it is something we don’t want to face, it is truth. The time has come for us to receive this unwelcome gift—because it holds the potential to be a repentance that can lead to life.

Some people say it is too late, but from a Christian perspective it is never too late. We are a people of hope, of resurrection. Our call is to care for the earth, and we can do that today.

From the Paris Climate Accord, to the plastic bag ban in Minneapolis, to solar panels on the roof at Plymouth Church—in so many ways, we are coming to the awareness we need to face.

And we can do more.

I know it sometimes feels useless. Bringing our bags to the markets, signing up for a solar garden, planning our travel more carefully, putting in new light bulbs—it all seems like such a drop in the bucket, doesn’t it? But here is the thing:

Drops in the bucket have been vastly underrated.

After all, how else are you going to fill the bucket? I’ve filled bucket by drops and it goes faster than you think. When you think about it, the whole path of Christian discipleship is dependent upon drops in the bucket.

We have some hard things to face. Instead of denial or anger, when some hard truth comes to your awareness, stop. In the silence ask: “Could this be for me a repentance that leads to life?”

God has a vibrant future in store for you: wondrous, unfolding, now!

Take a step. Do just one thing for your own good. Do just one thing for the good of the world. Hear that miraculous sound of one drop hitting the bottom of a bucket. It is the sound of hope!

A drop in the bucket that leads to life.

Amen.