*Acts 10:9-28, 34-36*

**Designed to Leak** *(Part Two: Seeing Others Differently)*

Last week, we discussed the first shift in becoming disciple-makers, to leak God’s grace onto others by changing our *self*-perception, by *seeing* ourselves differently, by seeing ourselves as *not* normal. And today, we talk about the *second* shift in being missional – that we leak better if we also see *others* differently – a shift in how we view non-Christians and the world. And that’s exactly what happened to *Peter* in how he viewed the Gentiles. In the same way, our view of others outside the faith needs to become more accurate and more nuanced. ***[Slide 2]***

The world has changed drastically, especially in the last 50 years. Models of sharing the Christian faith that were used even 20 years ago aren’t effective anymore – things like handing out “tracts” *(remember those)*, and using rational arguments to overcome someone’s logical objections, dragging people brain first across the line, so to speak. I’ve heard it put this way – Christians who rely on previous models are “scratching where people aren’t itching anymore.”

But in doing this, we try to be salt and light, without thinking about the people we’re talking to. It’s kind of like this – Wiebke told me a story once about how her dad made mashed potatoes, but instead of 2 tsp. of salt, he put in 2 Tbsp. of salt … of course it was way too salty, and then he tried to fix the problem by putting sugar in it … and I think someone added ketchup in there somewhere too, which of course is just more salt. Sometimes if we try to push our own model of sharing our faith all at once on people, it becomes like those potatoes, just way too much. Or, as for being light … it’s like walking with a friend outside on a dark night, and then shining a flashlight in their eyes without warning – overwhelming, right – disorienting.

So are we scratching where people aren’t itching anymore? ***[Slide 3]*** *…* Rather than sharing in a way that actually acknowledges and responds to the person in front of me, are we practicing an evangelism with inherited models that were fitted for different people in a different age? We can no longer assume people believe in God, and even if they do, that they have any biblical knowledge of God.

Now, more common are those who say they believe in God, and say they “like Jesus,” but they are filled, and I mean saturated, with distrust for the religious establishment – including churches. And, here’s the hard part, because it’s so easy to get on the defensive – to be offended by how they view us, especially since they live like … such and such … and see … how easy it is get stuck in one way of seeing people? …

On that note, let’s talk about Peter … Before having the vision, Peter would have thought that a Gentile Roman officer couldn’t become a follower of Christ. He too had an *inherited model* of viewing people outside the Jewish circle, and that was a roadblock to his disciple-making … Steeped in Jewish tradition and filled with certain biases, Peter was convinced his views on the Gentiles were right. Remember, this was the leader of the apostles, Jesus’ right hand man. He’d come a long way, but he had further to go. That’s good to remember for all of us who have been Christians for years! I mean look at Peter in this story; it took a three-part heavenly vision from God to change his mind. **[*Next slide* –** Peterand ***walk down from pulpit].***

Picture it: Peter goes up to the roof to pray – their roofs were flat - and he must have been praying for a while because he gets hungry, but he keeps praying while the meal is prepared, and the Scripture tells us “he falls into a trance.” He sees heaven opened and something like a large sheet was coming down to earth by its four corners – the mention of four corners is important – it symbolized the ends of the earth. So *whatever’s* on that sheet was meant to be all-inclusive, the world-over, okay? You have to imagine Peter looking up as the sheet is coming down, and he’s probably itching to see what’s in it … and his anticipation is growing to a boil, and he sees over the edge … *AND* … ***[Next Slide]*** it’s covered in unclean animals, all different kinds. He’s hungry and he wants to eat, but the Jewish kosher laws make all this meat unacceptable by the FDA, okay? And as a faithful Jewish Christian, he wouldn’t *want* to eat it.

Look what happens next. If you were Peter, you might think God was a little cruel – or at least had a weird sense of humor – because God says, “Go ahead Peter … dig in!” What??? Peter probably thinks to himself, “Ahh, this is test! … Like Jesus in the wilderness being asked to turn stones into bread. Okay, Lord, I see what you’re doing … I got this … ‘No, Lord, I’ve never eaten anything impure … I won’t touch what’s unclean.’ Yeah, that was good, God’s going to be pleased with me now … and God’s voice booms, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean!” … That’s right … *wait, what*?

I want you to notice Peter’s refusal: “No, Lord, I have never done that” ... because part of the thought behind Peter’s statement is “I can’t do it now, because I’ve never done it before.” How many things do we refuse to do because we’ve never done it before? … Who do we refuse to go to, like even Peter did? … And clearly Peter didn’t get the point at first because God had to repeat the whole show *two* more times! But he did get it … And he did go to Cornelius … and he saw all Gentiles differently from that day on.

We need a sheet-dropping experience too! The question is, how many times does God have to show us before we make the shift in how we see others? Because if we get it, like Peter got it, then we’ll see things differently, and we interact with other people differently. I saw a church ad a couple weeks ago: it read “We love tattoos” … “We love suits too.” ***[Slide #6]***

James Stewart, the great Scottish preacher of the 19th c. said – and I wish I could affect a Scottish broke, but I can’t – at least Wiebke says I can’t – anyway James Stewart said: “The gospel it is true, stays unchanged from age to age … it remains yesterday, today and forever the same; and yet while the basic message thus remains constant, our presentation of it must be largely conditioned by the actual world on which our eyes look today.” ***(Pause)***

We always have to adjust the way we leak God’s grace and Christ’s gospel onto people, because we’re talking to human beings, who are very different from each other at any one time, let alone from one generation to the next. Stewart goes on to say one of the primary questions Christians must ask themselves is, ‘What are the characteristic moods and tendencies of the age in which I minister?’ And right now, those characteristic moods and tendencies are changing.

But when the world changed in the past, the church tried to scratch the new itch. Following the model of Jesus, who took on the form of humanity – he incarnated to reach us – the servant church in different ages tried to do the same: 17th and 18th c. – that’s the Enlightenment, and so with the high emphasis on human reasoning, the church sought to present their faith by answering the question, “Here is why the gospel makes rational sense.” Then in the **19th** c. – that’s the *Industrial Age*, right – the value of work and production, okay, so the servant church expressed the gospel by answering the question, “Here is how Christianity *works* to make things better, how it contributes to the welfare of society” – so our faith was seen in our work ethic – like the letter of James – “Faith, unless it produces good deeds, is dead and useless.”

And over time, for various reasons, doubt and skepticism arose about the spiritual side of our faith, about the absolute claims that go with Christianity. So now the question is a little different – “Does this work in real life?” They seek truth differently. Instead of asking, “Show me how your faith makes sense,” they’re asking, “Does it work in real life?” And there’s a distinct difference there. And we need to present the gospel accordingly, because if we’re not seeing people right, we can’t incarnate ourselves to them – as Jesus did for us … as God helped Peter do to the Gentiles, and as the Spirit wants to do through us to our age. ***[Slide 7]***

One of the best ways for Christians to leak onto other people today, is by getting better at *telling stories* … and I don’t mean anecdotes … people can smell a cliché a mile away … they can smell the difference between an anecdote you picked up and put in your pocket, and *narrative* … We need to get better at telling the story of the Bible, which thankfully is mostly written as a narrative – of the multiple genres found in the Scriptures, story is by far the most dominant … and as Presbyterians we are uniquely suited to speak into 21st c. ears because we have an emphasis on the covenant story *…* we see how the Old Testament and New Testament go together, how they’re connected: ***[Click for 2nd half ]*** - it’s *Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation.*

I love how Dorothy Sayers says it – Sayers was a close friend to C.S. Lewis and J.R. Tolkien – she put it this way: “The drama is the dogma.” The story … is the truth. ***[3rd part]***. So telling the story of the Bible better, and the other half is learning how to better share our *own* story. That’s why we try to include Testimonies in our contemporary services. I’ve heard one Christian say that testimonies have a “built-in expiration date.” And what he meant by that is we need to be able to point out how God is continuing to work in our lives, not just talk about the day we came to Christ. My friend says he never shares a testimony that’s more than a year old …

I don’t think that’s necessary – there are many stories that are decades old that God can still use to change people. The point is to look at God working in our recent life so we can answer the question, “Is the gospel powerful?” … “Does it work in real life?” “Does it work in *your* life?” ***(Pause)***

One last question people are asking today is, in addition to “How does your gospel affect me?” is “How does your gospel affect the *world*?” And I found a video that I believe addresses this well, and because I’m running out of time, I’d like to show that now, and then I’ll try to wrap it up. *(Karen)*

*[This video was made by James Choung, and it’s called “Four Circles” – and I don’t know how many of you have ever heard of the “Bridge” diagram – you draw a chasm on a piece of paper and a person on one side, God on the other, and you help show a person that Christ and his cross is the bridge God made to cross the chasm – very popular in the 80s and 90s – well, this is becoming the new “Bridge diagram” to scratch the new itches people have… like “How does it affect the world?” It’s three minutes long. Take a look.] - “Four Circles”*

Cornelius told his story, Peter told his, and we can too. It’s not always easy, and it’s definitely not comfortable. When Peter entered Cornelius’ home, he broke a whole bunch of Jewish rules … and he *confessed* he wasn’t comfortable … but there was an eager audience, and he couldn’t hold back his message. God’s divine guidance and Peter’s willingness to grasp what he’d been shown combined to produce a *change* in his thinking, a change in his *view* of others, even though he was uncomfortable.

Then came his great story with its far-reaching scope … great themes like peace through Christ, his life, miracles, death and resurrection – all leaked out. And Peter had no sooner *started* sharing the gospel, and *his* story too if you notice, when God gave overwhelming approval by filling that Roman family with his Holy Spirit. And God can do the same through us. ***[Final Slide]***

Let me close with an example of telling our story. A pastor was doing an activity with his youth group – playing a Christian version of the game *Taboo* – if you’re not familiar with it, you get a word you have to get the members of your team to guess – like *yearbook* – but you can’t use certain words to help them guess – like you couldn’t use the words “school,” “class” or “photo.”

So the pastor writes down all these Christianese words the kids can’t use (like *Savior, sins, grace, gospel*), and they’re told in 100 words or less, answer this question, “What’s the significance of the cross in your life?” w/o using any of those words. And the kids are like, “Pfft. This is going to be so easy; you’re so dumb,” but one min. later they realize just how hard it is. Yet one girl came up with a great way to share her faith without traditional religious language.

She stood up and said, “I am Cinderella.” And she went on to share how her whole life she was seen and treated like the ugly stepsister … stuck in a life where she felt like she was under the foot of others and invisible to the world … and by the time Jesus put the glass slipper onto her foot, we were all crying … and all *thrilled* … by our own evangel, by the gospel. ***[Click]***  So sharing our story is not only good for others; it’s good for *us*! It’s good for us! And there are people everywhere, like Cornelius, eager to believe. So may we see ourselves differently, as salt and light, and may we see others differently, so that all of us together may share the same story. Amen.