

The Royal Poinciana Chapel

Sermon By

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Sixty Cocoanut Row, Palm Beach, Florida 33480

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Worldwide Communion Sunday

"CHRIST AND THE OTHER RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD!"

TEXT: "The Lord said to Abram... I will make your name great and you will be a blessing, and through you, all the families of the earth will be blessed."

Genesis 12:1-3

I. Prelude to the Sermon A Story

There was a feud between the Pastor and the Choir Director of the Hicksville Southern Baptist Church. It seems the first hint of trouble came when the Pastor preached a sermon on dedicating oneself to Christ and the church; the Choir Director chose to sing: "I Shall Not Be Moved."

Trying to believe it was a coincidence, the Pastor put the incident behind him. The next Sunday he preached on stewardship, the need to give. Afterward, the choir squirmed as the director led them in the hymn: "But, Jesus Paid It All."

By this time, the Pastor was losing his cool. Sunday morning attendance swelled however as the tension between the two built up. A large crowd showed up the next week to hear his sermon on "The Sin of Gossiping." The Choir Director had his choir sing: "I Love To Tell The Story."

There was no turning back. The following Sunday the Pastor told the congregation that unless something changed he was considering resigning. The entire church gasped when the Choir Director led them in: "Why Not Now?"

The poor Pastor resigned a week later; explaining that Jesus Christ had led him to this church, and that Jesus was now leading him

away. The Choir Director had the choir sing:
"What A Friend We Have In Jesus."

II. The Scripture Lesson

"Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the close of the age." Matthew 28:16-20

III. The Sermon

Once each year, on the first Sunday of October, many Protestant churches celebrate a Worldwide Communion Sunday. That practice began in the year that I was born (1936, if you care and are counting), at the Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh. It was initiated by the then-immediate past moderator of the National Presbyterian Church. As part of his duties, Dr. Hugh Thompson Kerr traveled the world (as moderators still do) to visit the mission stations. He came back looking for a way to declare our oneness with those serving in

Foreign fields, and also to alert American Christians that indigenous churches, "over there," were beginning to grow in the developing nations (they have continued), and that we would be well advised to search for some common ground with fellow Christians near and far away. "The world is changing" he said.

The day will come, he preached, when there would be only two kinds of people in the world: those who honor the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, and those who do not. That was sixty-seven years ago! He said that God will write, "So what?" across the top of the sectarian battles of the days of yore. The ultimate battle (among humans, not Armageddon) would be between those two sides. Each of us will have to pick one side or the other.

Well, times have changed. Oh dear, have they! But the timely reminder of the founder of Worldwide Communion still stands. We all belong together. We are one world, after all, and the good people of the earth need to stick together and to hold hands and hearts and hopes against the common enemy.

The Beginning

God promised Abraham that through him He would bless all the nations of the earth. But it took God's people a long time to have the promise in Genesis 12 sink in. In fact some observers would say that it has not yet managed to get down to the ground floor of human relations. Almost daily we hear of someone or another, in large public places or in lunchtime conversations at the local deli, whose inappropriate comments show how far apart people still really are.

In the beginning God wanted (and wants us now) to be one people, crossing the boundaries which others erect; to be one big happy family of mankind. After all we are all his children, brothers and sisters to everyone else. Every

father yearns for a happy family. But, as sometimes, even in the most religious of families, brothers and sisters fail or refuse to get along. So, is it any wonder that the failure escalates when we expand our vision from our private homes to the public domain all around the world!

God also taught the lesson early on in the story of Naomi and Ruth. He brought a little girl back from Moab, named Ruth. She was a foreigner, never there-to-fore to be admitted to Jewish homes, and surely not to marry into a Jewish family. Funny how God works, though. Boaz fell in love with her. Pretty little Ruth had long dark hair and was beautiful. They got married and had a child, and that child had children, and eventually, born out of the mixture of her foreign blood, generations away, came Joseph, the father of Jesus. God kept teaching it.

In the book of the Acts, chapter 10, there is another vivid presentation of the theme. Simon Peter, the chief of the Apostles is about to learn a lasting lesson about the way God deals with men: The "Rock" on which Jesus said he would build his church, is being given a "wake-up call" by the Lord. He was about to hit the wall of his previous opinions. In short, he was about to change.

No one likes to change. Not one of us likes to be told that the items we had closed the book on and finalized, are wrong in the eyes of God. People are reluctant to make a major shift of opinion. Simon Peter was confident and bold, a natural leader, and sure of himself. It would have been even harder for him.

By the time of Jesus, an Orthodox Jew would not/could not willingly enter the dwelling place of a Gentile or vice versa. Gentile food, it is clear from the passage, was thought to be "unclean." Moreover, Jews also refused to accept offers of Gentile hospitality. To sit at a table with a non-

Jew, back then, was to many intolerable, even unforgivable.

But in Acts 10, A Roman Centurion named Cornelius who was stationed at Caesarea, sixty-five miles north of Jerusalem, enters God's story. He was a devout man, given to giving alms to the poor. He was not Jewish. One afternoon, at 3 p.m., he had a vision, a dream, telling him to send some of his men down to Joppa to bring a man named Simon Peter up to Caesarea.

Meanwhile, Peter was praying at the same time that day and he also had a dream, a vision, that he should violate the laws and customs and prepare unclean food (beasts and birds not proscribed in the law) and eat it. Peter said he could not do that. Immediately, however, the men came from Cornelius to visit him. He fed them, talked to them, lodged them (all against the custom and the law). He then went up to visit Cornelius and stayed awhile.

When Peter got back to the Mother Church in Jerusalem, he was criticized for fraternizing with the foreigners. But, when Peter told them of his vision and the visit to Caesarea, it says, "They were relived and they praised God that Peter shared the good news with the Gentiles," for a while. But some soon drifted back into the private confines of their privileged faith, as we all tend to do. They did not want others to share it. It was theirs.

To come up to date: America has a historic commitment "to the huddled masses yearning to breathe free." It says so on the Statue of Liberty. When God first called us forth as a nation, with Europeans getting off a boat at Plymouth Rock, He declared a space on earth where religious freedom could begin to grow. It did. Immigrants from every nation came here to find a golden opportunity. But, it didn't work out, not entirely anyway. Some moved up the ladder. Many did not.

Ever since, the Lord God has been nudging us, encouraging us, commanding us, to focus on the purpose of our nation, to expand our vision and to open the arms of our love to everyone. Christ is shouting from the heavens: "Go out to the highways and byways and find the people of all nations and races and wrap the arms of Christian love around them. Care for little children. Care for the elderly. Care for families. Care for the poor. Care for those with special needs. It does not matter who they are. Give equal opportunity to all. Then you will be my people."

The Christian faith is not a private thing. It is meant to be shared. Christianity was growing up and going out on its own. That was part of God's plan. The last words Jesus spoke on earth were, "You shall be my witness ('Go into all the world...') in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

Dr. Halford Luccock once quipped that there are three kinds of people in the world. (1) First are "The Duck People." They are ones who go around looking for something to "quack" about, all the time. Wherever they go, whatever they see, (they waddle around churches too), they complain about it. They jump up and down at City Council meetings. They write nasty letters to their politicians, or their pastor, because something has changed in the age old way of doing things. They like to quack: "Quack, Quack, Quack!" The duck's eye view.

(2) A second group the professor called "The Cat's Eye people." Remember the rhyme, "Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you been? I've been to London to visit the 'Queen.' Pussy cat, pussy cat, what did you do there? 'I looked for a little mouse under the chair.'" The Cat's Eye view is one that comes up looking for the same things all the time. Wedded to petty little things they want, they miss the grand view of Buckingham Palace and the Abbey up the street,

and so much more. They keep their eyes on their chosen little mouse. (Or it could be their games or their town or their church, or their anything!)

(3) Thirdly, Dr. Luccock said, there are those with "The Worm's Eye" view. They are the ones who take a quick look around, finalize opinions instantly, dig down, and go back underground. Ones who have not had a new thought for decades. These think it is ridiculous to waste time and money trying to be fair to minorities. Or, to help the hungry and homeless and drug addicts. Or, to spend a dollar on overseas missions. They curse every time they read about expenditures for wheelchair access. It doesn't matter what it is, he and often she, pines for things of yesteryear. He wants all the Muslims to "go home." (And some other people, too.) He wants all the women to stay in their homes. Pity.

But there is a fourth view, of course. I call it (4) "The Christ View", where all of God's children are viewed with love, and peace is the goal, inclusion not exclusion. Reaching out to understand another's religion and way of life.

Edwin Markham once capsuled it nicely:

He drew a circle to shut me out
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I have the wit to win,
We drew a circle that took him in.

We are all in this mortal life together. There is only one planet Earth, only one place where we know we can live and breathe and enjoy our freedoms and our families and our friends and ourselves. We need to share the love of Christ, to let the light of the good news shine on those in the farthest corners of the Earth. Jesus is at home with all the religions of the world. After all, Abraham is the acknowledged father of Judaism, Islam and Christianity!

Jesus said: "You are the light of the world. A city set upon a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a stand and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." Be my witnesses to the ends of the earth for now and forevermore! Amen.

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