



feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)

Dear Church Family,

One of the most encouraging aspects to the story of Acts in the first four chapter is the response of the crowd to the preaching of the Kingdom. In Luke, the crowd was flocking to Jesus' miracles, but ended up siding with the religious leaders and calling for Jesus' crucifixion. In Acts, the crowd is responding to the message of salvation and becoming disciples in huge numbers. Why has this happened? Certainly the signs and wonders, tongues and healing miracles, get their attention. But they were also attracted to Jesus' miracles without becoming disciples. And the religious leaders see the same miracles but are not moved to discipleship. Acts 2:37 says "*Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"*" They have just heard they have a crucified Jesus who God has made both Lord and Christ.

What were they experiencing when they were *cut to the heart*? Other Scripture passages have a similar idea. Hebrews 4:12-13, "*For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*" And Simeon tells Mary in Luke 2:33 "*Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.*" This is a cutting that is revealing and what is exposed is not a good thing. When we are cut to the heart like this, we are upset by what we have done and what this reveals or shows about who we are. This is bad news in terms of our sense of self.

But, this is what turns them from interest in miracles and divine power to seeking salvation for their souls. They understand their standing before God as sinners and therefore their need for salvation. They now appreciate what Jesus has done for them in his death and resurrection. They are in a place where they are able to see and hear the message of salvation that others (religious leaders) are not seeing and hearing. So the piercing that is exposing is also revealing, making known to them important truths that they need to see and hear. This conviction that is so upsetting is the cure for the spiritual dullness that plagues the people that is spoken through the prophet Isaiah and quoted by Paul at the end of Acts 28:25-28 (recall Stuart's sermon on hearing). It is the piercing conviction of their sin that enables them to understand with their heart and turn and be healed.

Conviction and awareness of sin as crucial to receiving and serving the Lord Jesus is a dominant theme of Luke. Peter presents the model response to Jesus in chapter 5. Witnessing the miraculous catch of fish, he cries, "*Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.*" He is not excited about the possibilities of being close to a miracle worker because he is too aware of his own unworthiness. With the sinful woman of Luke 7:36-50 Jesus notes her devotion to Him and how it is expressed and contrasts that with how Simon the Pharisee has treated Him. He then says that the source of her devotion is her awareness of being a great sinner and therefore her awareness of being forgiven so much. So here awareness of sin not only brings us to a place of being able to hear and respond to the message of salvation, it also fuels devotion to the Lord

for he who is forgiven much loves much but he who is forgiven little loves little. Weaken our conviction and awareness of sin and our love and devotion to the Lord will be weakened.

Throughout the gospel, it is the people who are most aware of their sinfulness who respond favorably to Jesus and his message of the kingdom. People who are aware that they are sick and in need of a physician as Jesus explains to the religious leaders objecting to his eating with sinners, *“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”* To the cult of self-esteem that dominates our day, the marginalized sinners of Luke’s gospel are pitied because they are made to feel badly about themselves by society. But it is their keen awareness of being sinners that helps them to receive Jesus. In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18), it is the tax collector who is so aware of his sin who goes away justified.

So awareness of sin is essential to a saving relationship with God, yet we live within a cultural setting that does not want to face sin or our own sinfulness. This is not fundamentally about the desire to do whatever we please, although that is a part of it. It is a deeper issue of identity and how we construct our identity. Dale Kuehne talks about the iWorld and how people in the West answer fundamental questions about identity by looking within rather than looking to the opinion of others. From Scripture we know that that we were not created to find our identity in ourselves or in the eyes of others. We were always created to find identity in our relationship with God. But finding our identity within will lead to a need to see myself as worthy and essentially sound or good. I will need affirmation of who I am, will need to be built up, not cut to the heart.

Can you appreciate how much an identity based on me as an individual contributes to our secular culture’s aversion to judgment, conviction and sin? The very idea is perceived as psychologically unhealthy. And so people are close minded to even the idea of their own sinfulness, their own unworthiness that will expose their need and lead them to the gospel. How are we to be witnesses to such a generation? Telling them they are sinners is such a negative message that they will reject it without even really considering it. It is too threatening.

We can live before them as sinners saved by grace, which means that we need to embrace our sinfulness and our unworthiness. We need to show them that in Christ, we can face our failures, our brokenness, own our sinfulness because we have found life and significance in a source other than self-esteem or the approval of society. We have found it in Jesus and our relationship with God in Christ.

And this light will shine brightest from our lives when we are walking through experiences that expose our brokenness and unworthiness. These are difficult times for our self-esteem, but they are times when we can celebrate our salvation, acceptance, love and approval in Christ more deeply. We can have joy when our self-esteem is suffering because we can say along with Paul, *“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”* (Gal 3:20-21). May the Holy Spirit plant this truth deep into our hearts and may we then become more effective fishers of men.

Pastorally Yours,
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