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SUNDAY: Easter 5

SERMON: Shifting Our Paradigms

Text(s): Acts 11:1-18; John 13:31-35

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When Thomas Kuhn, a professor of science at Harvard and at Cal Berkeley, wrote a book about 45 years ago, entitled *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, he probably couldn't have guessed he would be responsible for introducing a new phrase into our cultural vocabulary—the phrase “paradigm shift.” Kuhn argued that science is perhaps not quite the neat, orderly affair that we are sometimes led to believe. Scientific discoveries do not come about in a straight-line fashion, with one discovery leading logically to the next. Rather, occasionally, a scientist or a group of scientists will suddenly make an unexpected imaginative leap beyond the commonly accepted ways of looking at things and adopt a revolutionary new way of looking at the same phenomena—a leap of faith, if you will—and this changes everything; the old way of looking at the problem will not do anymore. One of the examples he used was the so-called Copernican revolution during the Middle Ages, when astronomers like Copernicus and later Galileo, began to promote the notion that the earth revolved around the sun rather than the sun revolving around the earth. Within a relatively short span of time, it became impossible any longer for anyone to seriously think that the sun and the planets revolve around the earth. The paradigm had shifted.

Even as Kuhn was writing, a similar paradigm shift was, and still is, revolutionizing our cosmology once again, making Galileo's and Newton's universe seem, well, quaint. Quantum mechanics has taught us that the predictable and verifiable way matter behaves at the molecular and larger level is very different from the unpredictable way it behaves at the atomic and sub-atomic level. Heisenberg's “uncertainty principle” is a name commonly given to this unpredictability of things in the subatomic world.

We're still not sure where it's all leading, but no physicist today can go backwards and think about the structure of the universe without taking it into account. The quest for certainty that characterized the scientific enterprise for the past three hundred years has given way to a broad acceptance of a deep level of uncertainty. In fact, as philosopher Brian Austin argues in a new book, this paradigm shift opens the way for faith in a way that the previous certainty-based paradigm of science excluded.

Many analysts of culture are saying that we are in the midst of another titanic paradigm shift with the advent of the computer age and the internet. But we don't need cultural analysts to tell us that. Anyone watching a teenager's flying thumbs as he or she “texts” a friend on their cell phone, or who has ever attempted to delve into the mysteries of MySpace or YouTube on the Web knows that we live in a new paradigm of how information gets transmitted and stored, and even of how relationships are made and broken. We're just beginning to sense the impact all of this is going to have on current social, political, and economic structures and institutions.

The story we heard this morning from the Book of Acts, which is Volume II of St. Luke's Gospel, is the story of a paradigm shift that revolutionized the community of the earliest followers of Jesus. It's a shift that is responsible for every one of us being here this morning. If it had not taken place, Christianity would have remained at most, another sect or denomination within first-century Judaism, and most likely would not have survived the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D.70 under the Roman general Titus. That paradigm shift, that revolution in consciousness that took place among the earliest followers of Jesus, was their re-discovery of a truth voiced by prophets within their own Jewish tradition that had often been relegated to a minority view—that God had chosen the people of Israel, not because they were better or more deserving than others, but because they were to be God's partners and agents in redeeming the whole world. On the

religious and cultural maps of mainstream first-century Judaism, the place that other peoples, who were termed Gentiles, played in God's purposes was similar to those undiscovered regions on ancient nautical maps prior to the voyages of Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama. In the regions where no one had previously sailed, the old maps simply said, "Here be dragons." "Here be Gentiles." Or as we might phrase it, the Gentiles weren't even on their religious radar screen.

St. Paul appears to have been one of the first of the early Jewish followers of Jesus to have grasped the mind-boggling notion that God loved the Gentiles as well. In his own account of his paradigm shift on the Damascus road, which we find in his letter to the Galatians, he says, "*God was pleased to reveal his Son to me so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.*" Paul's insistence that God was not the private tribal or national deity of Israel, but the God of the whole earth who loved other peoples as much as he loved the chosen people, was a revolutionary notion. It was a notion that "set the cat among the pigeons" so to speak, and made Paul one of the most controversial figures of first-century Judaism and of the early Christian movement, often bringing him into conflict with his fellow apostles. It is either the text or the sub-text of the conversations within first-century Judaism that ultimately led to the break between the followers of Jesus and the rest of Judaism. In fact, most of the writings in our New Testament have in the background, this question of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles.

Luke's purpose in this story of Peter's interrogation on this very issue by Jewish Christian leaders in Jerusalem is to show that the two greatest leaders, martyrs, and saints of the early church, Peter and Paul, were in accord on this fundamental issue, and that they were successful in convincing the other early Christian leaders who simply saw their faith in Jesus as just a better way to be Jewish. In response to their

questions, Peter tells them a story of his own paradigm shift.

Like Paul, Peter's radical re-drawing of his cultural and religious map came in the form of a visionary experience or a leap of imagination, as Thomas Kuhn might say. One night, as Luke has Peter tell it, Peter had a dream. In the dream, he saw something like a great sheet being lowered from heaven. On the sheet were all sorts of animals that by the dietary standards of Jewish religious law were considered impure. They weren't *kosher*. While Peter, in his dream, is looking at the sheet, he hears a voice that says, "*Peter, get up and kill some of these animals and eat them.*" When Peter naturally objects to eating *trafe* food, the voice, that he recognizes as the voice of God, rebukes him sternly saying "*Peter, how dare you call what I have created impure or profane!*" And then, for good measure, the whole scene was repeated three times to make sure Peter got the message. Peter says, "*At that very moment, three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.*" Them and us. Now there's something we're all very good at, aren't we— setting up distinctions between "them" and "us." That's just about the oldest trick in the human playbook. We're never content to just be "us;" we always seem to need a "them" over against which to define ourselves.

The three Gentile men who came to his door and asked him to go to the city of Caesarea had been sent by a Roman centurion named Cornelius and a group of similarly interested Gentiles who were part of his family or circle of acquaintances. This request blew Peter away. God's loving concern for the Gentiles was not part of his ruling paradigm, the map of his universe. But at Cornelius's house Peter suddenly discovered that God had a better map. He suddenly understood the meaning of his dream. "*I remembered, he said, 'the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with*

water, but you will be baptized by the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave them e.g., the Gentiles, the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God” And then Luke wraps up the story by saying, *“When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, ‘Then God has given even to the Gentiles, the repentance that leads to life.’* Even to the Gentiles! Even to “them.”

Peter’s struggle to overcome his own cultural and ethnic and religious chauvinism should not hard for us to understand. Which of us is totally free of it? All of us look at the world through eyeglasses that are furnished by our culture, our geographical location, our political structures, our language, and our religious traditions and beliefs. And since most of us don’t look *at* our eyeglasses but only look *through* them at what’s around us, for the most part we are unaware that we are, in fact, wearing cultural or religious lenses that determine, and inevitably limit what we see. Those lenses furnish us with our dominant or ruling paradigm. Often, to be able to see differently, we have to undergo a paradigm shift, or to use biblical language, to be converted.

I wonder what paradigm shifts some of us need to undergo? What new maps of God’s ways with the world do we need to replace the outdated and incomplete maps that we currently use to navigate our journey through life? What people or group of people would take the place of the term Gentiles in that little phrase, “even to the Gentiles?” Even to. . . whom? Who is “them” over against “us?” Who isn’t on our radar screen? What lies beyond the boundaries of our maps of the world? What categories or labels do we attach to people that allow us to simply ignore or dismiss them from our need to love them as God loves them? What unjust political or economic structures do we tolerate because we are so used to viewing the world through the particular set of lenses our culture gives us that

we cannot see the life-destroying effects of some of those structures? What opportunities for service in the name of Christ are we missing because we are locked into seeing other people in certain ways?

Some years ago, I heard George Hunter, Distinguished Professor of Evangelism and Church Growth at the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission, tell of his being on the subway in New York one evening, after rush hour was over, and the subway car was not too crowded. A young man in his thirties, accompanied by a small boy about six years old got on and sat down across from him. The little boy began to act up and misbehave in ways that were obviously annoying to the other people in the car. He was walking up and down in the aisle making irritating noises, occasionally and purposefully bumping into other people, sticking his tongue out at people when they frowned at him, and just generally acting in an ill-behaved and undisciplined fashion. George said that he and the others were getting fairly annoyed, especially because the father appeared to take no notice of his son’s behavior. He just stared in rather Zen-like fashion straight ahead of him and appeared to off in some other world of his own. George said that he even began to speculate that the young father might have been a bit stoned on drugs. Finally, one older gentleman, to the approval of everyone else in the subway car, got up and approached the father and said, “Young man, your son is being rude and obnoxious. Can’t you keep him under control?” The father looked up at the older man in a rather confused and vague manner, and then said, “Oh, yes, excuse me, I’m really sorry. You’re right. I really suppose I should do something with him. But I’m not quite sure what to do. You see, his mother died in the hospital a few hours ago, and we’re on our way home.”

George said that he and everyone else on that subway car underwent an immediate paradigm shift. Suddenly that little boy’s bad

behavior took on a completely different meaning. Irritation immediately gave way to sympathy, and people began moving toward the young man and his son to offer their sympathy and encouragement.

If the news about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead does not have the power to create such paradigm shifts in us, and enable us to view other people as God sees them, then it's not really good news for us or for anyone else. But if it can offer us a new map by which to navigate, if suddenly new faces and new categories and new insights begin to appear on our map where only the phrase "Here be dragons," used to appear, if it can enlarge our understanding of God and God's ways with the world, if it can enable us to reach out in love to others, which Jesus said would be the evidence that we are his disciples, then the Easter message is good news indeed. And we will be amazed at just how boundless is the mercy of God, and how broad the reach of God's love. It will reach even to the Gentiles, even to us.