

SERMON – MAY 15, 2022 – (Flowering of Faith series) “Surprised Servants”

Grace to you and Peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ, Amen.

The Israelite city of Joppa, now a part of Tel Aviv on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, has a spectacular view. It lies 125 feet above that sea, on a rocky cape. For many years it was the only natural harbor between Egypt in the south and Acre in the north. As such Joppa has always been a prominent location; armies across the area sought to conquer and use it. Ships have been launched from Joppa and have come back to Joppa all the time.

Two men of the Bible came to Joppa, separated in time by 800 years. The first of the two men, a prophet in the time of King Jeroboam of Israel, was named Jonah. Yes, that Jonah. As we read in his book, this prophet had just received a call from God. God had proclaimed to Jonah, “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.” The very next verse, Jonah 1:3, is startling: “But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so Jonah paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.” Wow.

You see, Jonah was leaving on a ship to go all the way to the Spanish end of the Mediterranean Sea, about as far from Nineveh as you can get. Why? Because Jonah loved Israel and hated the Assyrian Empire and its capital, Nineveh. This empire was a constant threat to the nation of Israel (the northern 10 tribes) and would later destroy it. I imagine Jonah, about to depart, looking out to the Mediterranean from that Joppa promontory, planning to defy God and head west; before getting there Jonah would meet a certain “great fish.”

The second of the two men in Joppa, who arrived there 800 years later, was probably also thinking about defying the Lord's command. It was Peter. He had just been traveling to Joppa to heal a prominent Christian there, Tabitha. Peter, seeped in prayer, raised Tabitha from the dead, causing many there to believe. Then Peter decided to stay in Joppa awhile. He was praying one day on the roof of the house where he was staying when Peter received a strange dream that God sent him three times. The Spirit of God was talking to Peter through that dream. The Voice – the voice of the Spirit – then got to the point: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Now the word "profane" in Greek there really means "common." Jews at that time called all Gentiles "common," while they (the Jews) were, by implication, UN-common, uncommonly blessed by God to be far above everyone else in the world.

Up on that roof, Peter had that same view of the sea that Jonah had years earlier, and the same challenge Jonah had. Luke tells us Peter was "greatly puzzled" and "still thinking" about the vision from God he had just received when the three men that Cornelius (the Roman Centurion) had sent had arrived to see Peter. It was then that the Holy Spirit said to Peter, "Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, GO DOWN (down from the roof), and go with these men without hesitation; for I," said the Spirit, "have sent them." Peter must have been shocked to find that these 3 men were Gentile and not Jewish; he was trained as a Jew not to have anything to do with Gentiles. But something happened to Peter between the time that he was on the roof praying about what the Spirit had revealed to him and what Peter said to the men at the door. Something of divine origin. Let me explain.

Since Jonah was supposed to go to Nineveh and criticize their evil ways and warn them of destruction, we don't often think of Jonah as "serving" the people of Nineveh. But when eventually (after being belched out of the big fish) God changed the mind of Jonah and he went and preached in Nineveh, we see that Jonah did the Ninevites a service, for they repented from the king on down. Thousands upon thousands repented, thanks to the message Jonah brought them. Now, Jonah himself had no feeling for the people of Nineveh. In fact, after they repented, Jonah sulked when God relented from punishing them. Jonah was angry that God had relented from punishment. He said to God, "Lord! Is not this what I said while I was in my own country? What You have done for the Ninevites is why I fled to Tarshish in the beginning for I knew that You were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to repent from punishing people." For Jonah, there were people he wanted to serve, and other people that he DIDN'T want to serve, even though, as God replied, these Ninevites "did not know their right hand from their left." Peter, like Jonah there in Joppa, was confronted with a choice. Would he SERVE these three Gentile outsiders? Or would he be like Jonah and run away from the challenge?

The purpose (out of the five purposes) that we are focusing upon today is SERVICE. It comes out of God commanding in the Old Testament to "love your neighbor as yourself." But there are times when we do not want to love and serve our neighbor. For various reasons, we don't want to follow through with God's call to help this or that person. One of the results of not serving others is that we do not "grow" as Christians; our faith does not "flower" as it should.

My gardener friend has let me know that we gardeners are called to "serve" our plants not just by planting them but by continuing to take care of them day

after day and week after week. We read: "To keep flowers or flowerpots blooming continuously, fertilizing is a must! No matter how good the soil, potted plants need additional energy throughout the season [throughout their lives] to last." The same is true with all the people around us, people made in the image and likeness of God. Our divine call to serve others also calls us to AVOID looking down on those we are to serve and AVOID "pulling a Jonah.". We are called to "check in" on others, and realize, unlike Jonah, that our service to others is necessary for the Lord to be able to love and save them.

Back to Peter. When Peter went down to meet these men, he didn't hem and haw; he obeyed the Spirit and didn't hesitate. He said to the three, "I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming to see me?" You see, Peter allowed himself to be transformed by the Spirit as he traveled down those stairs. He was ready to help them, no matter what. He put aside any qualms he might have had, reflected upon his OWN need for God, and humbly began to identify with people he had never before identified with in his life. He not only reached out to these 3 Gentiles; by going with them he ended up even helping their master, who was one of those hated Roman centurions; you see, just as Nineveh was the enemy for Jonah, Rome was the enemy to any good Jew. But Peter went ahead and visited Cornelius and the many gathered at the house of Cornelius; through Peter's act of service the Spirit converted many Gentiles that day. Peter witnessed the Spirit at work in these Gentile people, and that the Spirit was opening a door that led Jesus to live in and save many Gentiles (Gentiles like you and me) ever since.

What was true for Peter then is true for us today. Peter was willing to take risks to serve others; sometimes we are called to take risks to do the same. Peter

brought along six other Jewish Christians from Joppa to Caesarea in order later to explain to the leaders in Jerusalem what might and did happen. You see Peter violated Jewish law when he entered the Gentile home in Caesarea. Afterwards Peter and the six witnesses immediately went to Jerusalem to explain how the Spirit of Jesus had led Peter to serve in a new and dramatic way. We, too, are often called by the Spirit to serve others around us in new and dramatic ways. Look for it!

In our Gospel today we see Jesus serving the disciples in a new and dramatic way by washing their feet; at that time foot washing was considered “a despicable, slave-worthy task.” Feet in those days were encrusted with “dust, muck, and manure from scores of creatures,” Glenn McDonald writes, that “would caked one’s feet on a daily basis.” Peter objected to Jesus washing ugly, smelly feet, of course; he saw Jesus as too holy to stoop to serving others in this degrading way. Jesus agreed that certain kinds of service was seen by the world as degrading YET are NOT seen as degrading by God. He commands the disciples (and you and me) “If I, your Teacher and Lord, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” “Very truly,” He added, “servants are not greater than their master.” We servants of Christ are called, like our Master, to do difficult things.

Jesus is not just talking about foot washing. Think of all the things God may call upon you to do that the world (or your inner self) would call “degrading.” Think about how God may call upon you to be the primary caregiver of someone helpless; think about caring for someone the world thinks is obnoxious; think about caring for someone who is not openly grateful; but also think about how we are sometimes like those people, and recall that Christ died not only for us but

also for THEM, and through a degrading death on a cross. Peter was tempted by the world around him to feel degraded by hanging out with Gentiles and other outsiders; but that is not the way of our Lord Jesus, nor the way of His God, the God who IS unconditional love.

A couple other things about the particularly Christian way of service. First, we are not to serve to bring glory to ourselves. When Peter arrived, Cornelius bowed to him as if he were a god. Luke writes, "Peter made him get up, saying, 'I am only a mortal.'" God cannot shine through our actions if we prefer to shine. It's not about us.

Secondly, it's important not to let OUR service agendas be more important than the agendas of those we serve. When Peter arrived, he didn't say to Cornelius and company, "Here's what we're going to do." He said, "Now may I ask why you sent for me?" He was open to whatever the Spirit had sent him there for.

Thirdly, my gardener friend tells me that the best way to fertilize and care for plants is avoid doing just a spectacular thing or two with them. "The key," we read, "is to provide nourishment in slow, weaker doses to keep the plants growing gradually." Like in our Nora ministry, we are there to help for the long haul. The same is true for us Christians individually. Slow and steady service is far more effective, and, again, more about the people we help than about us.

Fourthly, we Christians tend to serve others but feel uncomfortable BEING served. We like to be in control, and when we serve sometimes, we like it because WE'RE in control. But true community is never built on a one-way street. The Christians of the New Testament knew this was important; we find the word "mutual" used constantly. "Be mutually encouraged by each other's faith," states Paul. He adds, "love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in

showing honor.” Hebrews 13:1, “Let mutual love continue.” 2nd Peter 1:7, show “godliness by way of mutual affection.” As we will sing shortly, “Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too.” There’s joy in mutual service; it’s why Jesus declared today of the service Christians can provide, “You are blessed if you do them.”

One scholar said of Peter in his conversion of Cornelius in Acts, chapter 10: “The principle subject of this chapter is not so much the conversion of Cornelius as the conversion of Peter.” The Spirit literally in the Greek tells Peter, “*Mayden diakrinomenos*” – “Don’t discriminate” against non-Jews. So, let us not let our prejudices and selfish concerns get in the way of the surprising calls to service that God sends our way. Let us live out our own Acts 10 accounts of service to others that we would never have imagined before they occurred. Let us be empowered, as Peter was, by the Spirit’s call to serve, and let us let the Spirit transform us, as Peter was transformed, to be the heart, hands and voice of Christ. Amen!