

Cast the Bread
Acts 8:1-8

Last fall, I engaged in conversation with a young mother at Witbecks. She had a couple of really cute and well behaved kids. Usually Debbi would be the one chatting with the little ones and engaging the mom; but she was in another aisle – in fact, she disappeared and I had no idea where she was, which is not unusual – so I got to have a turn. I don't recall the full extent of the conversation; I'm sure it was mostly idle chat about the children and the struggles of being a mom. I asked if she was from Clare and when she said yes, I began telling her about Trunk and Treat, explaining how the kids would have such a wonderful time in a safe environment. I asked where she lived so that I could give her directions to the north church parking lot. Her response was not exactly what I expected.

Maybe it was because I had taken an interest in her and her children, but before I asked the question the mom's face was alive, her eyes smiled, and she seemed to appreciate being noticed. But as soon as I asked where she lived, her head dropped, she averted her eyes, and she truly acted ashamed. "We live in the trailer park across the tracks," she half mumbled. I made sure she knew where to go and that there would also be a free meal available with Saturday Soup that she and her kids could enjoy as well. She acknowledged the invitation; but, sadly, her smile disappeared.

We live in one of the poorest counties in the state- either 2nd or 3rd highest in childhood poverty. There are the poor and very poor, and well as middle class and a few wealthy. We have varying levels of education; but most of our residents are high school and GED grads or below. There are many churches that represent various forms of Christianity in our community and they typically work together well. But mostly the people of Clare hold to no faith at all; over 75% are unchurched.

If we will out live our lives we must be willing to break down the walls so that we can cast the Bread of Life. In order to live into Jesus' mission to rock our world with hope, we have to address our biases and prejudices (our pre-judgments) so that we can love everyone with God's love. We can take our cue from the early church.

Remember what Jesus told the disciples before the Holy Spirit was poured out? He told them that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Thus far, the church has been very successful in Jerusalem; the last count is 5000 strong with notes of continued growth. But despite its international beginning at Pentecost, the church had not really branched out. Initially the early church focused on what is familiar and comfortable. Sound familiar? Yeah, we tend to focus there, too.

But the larger and more influential they get, the less comfortable ministry got. (**Read Text here.**) The early church challenged the norm and changed the "community code" and some people didn't like it. Isn't it fascinating that when hope and life and love begin to take root the very ones who need it most stand against it the hardest? For the church in Jerusalem, the resistance was so strong that it caused believers to scatter, which is what Jesus said they were to do (Ac.1:8). And wherever they went, the believers shared the Good News. They preached and demonstrated salvation in Jesus just as they had done in Jerusalem.

But now it was different. Now they had to be willing to scale walls, walls of bias and prejudice. This was especially poignant in Samaria. Samaritans were descendants of Jews who had been left in Israel when the people of Israel were taken into exile. Because these Jews chose to intermarry and "dishonor" themselves with foreigners during this time, the Samaritans were seen as half-breeds and traitors by the Jews. Most Jews would go out of their way to avoid even walking on Samaritan soil. But not Jesus; he traveled through Samaria on several occasions. On one such trip, Jesus had a conversation with a woman while his disciples went to buy some food.

In that conversation we hear of some of the contention between Samaritans and Jews. “Jews worship in Jerusalem, but Samaritans worship on this mountain. Who’s right?” When they return the disciples are startled to find Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman. “There are certain things you just don’t do, right?” Jesus was breaking 4 walls: cultural, gender, reputation, and religious tradition.

How about us? Look around. What differences do you see? The fact is we are a pretty homogenous group. It is time we started to scale our walls - they are our walls, not theirs - so that the mission God has given can be fulfilled in our own community, so that we will be ready to fulfill the mission to the ends of the earth, and so that the Bread of Life can be cast out to satisfy hungry souls and spirits that are growling.

There are two things we must be careful not to do as we strive to tear down our walls and share Jesus, the Bread of Life, with others. *First, don’t widen the door that God has narrowed.* This may seem contrary to the mission to be witnessed to the world. But we must be careful that we don’t compromise the faith for the sake of reaching a culture for Jesus.

As Philip and other believers shared the Good News, God chose to do many wonderful signs and miracles. Many people believed the Good News of salvation in Jesus and were baptized, including a guy named Simon. Now Simon was a sorcerer before he was baptized and because of his previous profession, he followed Philip everywhere “astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.” When Peter and John arrived and laid hands on the believers, they received the Holy Spirit. Simon so badly wanted to be a part of the action that he offered to pay Peter for the ability to give the Holy Spirit to others.

Some suggest that Simon did not truly believe but only wanted to get in on the act for personal gain. I believe Simon truly believed and truly wanted to be a part of the church that was being established. But Salvation is not for sale, and neither is the Holy Spirit. Salvation is by

faith in Jesus Christ and God sends the Holy Spirit so that we can be equipped to share that salvation with others. Peter rebukes Simon so that the truth of the Gospel is not compromised. God is committed to the spread of the Gospel; however, as Jesus said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn.14:6). God’s way of salvation is Jesus. There is only one way to God regardless of what culture a person comes from. The wonderful thing is that with God there is no favoritism; the rule of faith applies equally to all.

Second, don’t narrow the door that God has widened. Cultural differences do not excuse us from sharing the Good news of Salvation. With the church established in Samaria, God sends Philip to a road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza where he encounters an Ethiopian eunuch. Now there are many potential reasons for Philip not to engage this man which are not unlike some of our reasons for avoiding certain segments of our population. The man was different.

This eunuch was an important official to the queen of Egypt. He was socially important, intelligent, dark-skinned, and fluent in at least two languages, probably more. But Philip, even though he was the polar opposite on most of the differences, was willing to look through them so that this man could know, believe, and be baptized.

Church, we need to look beyond our personal biases and cultural prejudices for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of helping others know and experience the salvation that Jesus came to give. Try to imagine how history might be different if Philip and the other believers had allowed their personal bias and cultural prejudice to narrow the door. You and I may well not believe. We would not know the hope of the Gospel.

The mission that Jesus gave to the disciples is still ours today. God still desires to cast the Bread of Life by scattering his people across cultural boundaries. Are we resisting God’s intention in our lives because of our own bias and prejudice? Or, are we willing to be scattered? There’s this great mission field right here in Clare ...