

Slow on the Uptake

Sermon

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Acts 2:14a, 36-41

In my grandmother's world, propriety reigned supreme. The main thing in life was to be pleasant and polite. The cardinal sin was not pride; it was bad manners. My grandmother considered any man who did not tip his hat and polish his shoes to be a savage. And I'll never forget the look on her face when my father once belched in her presence.

The problem with this, of course, is that while propriety may have its place, it is also something of a sham. It is to put a lot of spit shine on something that's dirty at its core. But my grandmother, to my knowledge, never broke form. She maintained the standards of propriety come what may, even if at times it drove her to euphemize.

For instance, my grandmother's sister Henrietta was, what we in a world where propriety does *not* reign supreme, would call a tightwad. She had plenty of money. She just couldn't bring herself to spend it. And she wasn't concerned to be all that subtle about it either. Often when I visited my grandmother, she and Aunt Henrietta would take me out to dinner. I quickly noticed that Aunt Henrietta always waited for my grandmother to order first so that if my grandmother happened to order the two for one special she could order it too and have to pay nothing. That failing, I once noticed her order a meal and after eating two thirds of it, return it to the kitchen claiming there was a hair in it. Another time I noticed when the bill was presented, she claimed she'd left her wallet at home. Things built to a head when both my grandmother and I together noticed that Aunt

Henrietta had walked off with the ketchup bottle in her purse. After that when I visited my grandmother, she took me to dinner alone. By way of explanation for Aunt Henrietta's absence, she euphemized that she didn't want to do anything to undermine Aunt Henrietta's commitment to frugality.

With my grandmother's blood in my veins then, I sought long and hard for the right euphemism to describe what I consider to be the Apostle Peter's most significant character flaw. But I sought in vain. I could find no euphemism for slow on the uptake. If Aunt Henrietta was a tightwad, then the Apostle Peter was slow on the uptake.

The gospel writers, who too must have lived in a world where propriety did *not* reign supreme, made no bones about it. Take for instance, the debacle that surrounded the crucifixion. The moment Jesus was arrested, Peter fled in blind panic. He had no idea where Jesus' arrest would lead, so out of curiosity he attempted to follow events from a distance. But he was a Galilean in Judea. He stood out like a Texan in New York. People put two and two together and accused him of being an associate of Jesus', who too was a Galilean. Again, in blind panic, Peter cursed and swore that he'd never laid eyes on the man.

But why that reaction? It can only be because Peter was slow on the uptake. Jesus had warned him very specifically and directly not once, not twice, but three times that he was going to Jerusalem to be crucified.

Time one: “Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise.”

Time two: “For he was teaching his disciples saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him and three days after being killed he will rise again.””

Time three: “See, we are going up to Jerusalem and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, then they will hand him over to the Gentiles. They will mock him and spit upon him and flog him and kill him, and after three days he will rise again.”

Jesus did not exactly beat around the bush about it. And he made more disclosures than these three. The night before his crucifixion, for example, he told Peter his body would be broken and his blood spilled. So why that reaction?

Or take the debacle that surrounded the resurrection. All three times that Jesus warned Peter he would be crucified, he assured him that he would in three days rise from the dead. More so, three days after the crucifixion, three women, all of whom Peter knew and trusted and one of whom was Jesus’ own mother reported to him that two angels had appeared to them and proclaimed that Jesus had risen from the dead. Yet he dismissed their report as an idle tale.

It was only after the risen Jesus appeared to him personally that he finally comprehended that Jesus was crucified *for the sake of the resurrection*, that through it eternal reconciliation could be made known.

You'd think after all this that Peter would have realized he was slow on the uptake and be *en guard* against it. No such luck. He was so slow on the uptake that he didn't realize he was slow on the uptake. After finally comprehending that Jesus was crucified *for the sake of the resurrection* that through it eternal reconciliation could be made known, he presumed that eternal reconciliation was only for the Jews; that they had finally scored the big payback for *being* the Jews. It didn't occur to him that there might be wider ramifications.

Even after the apostle Philip reported that Samaritans were being converted left and right and that even an Ethiopian eunuch was on board, and the apostle Paul declared himself elect to be the apostle to the Gentiles, it didn't occur to him that there might be wider ramifications.

Then God granted him a vision. A mantle was lowered from the heavens filled with all manner of unclean food and a voice from the heavens commanded him to eat. Peter refused, citing his zeal for Jewish cleanliness laws. So God, obviously aware of who he was dealing with, repeated the vision three times. And finally, finally, finally Mr. Slow on the Uptake comprehended the fullness of it. Jesus Christ was crucified for the sake of

the resurrection, that through it the eternal reconciliation *of all humankind* could be made known.

Yes, Peter was definitely slow on the uptake. And, as I said, we live in a world where propriety does not reign supreme or even reign at all, so there's no sense to euphemize. Perhaps rather than euphemize, we should confront the fact head on and attempt to account for it. And so, why was Peter slow on the uptake? It was not, I don't think, that he was merely dumb or dense. The gospel writers describe him as ardent and impetuous, but this does not bespeak a lack of intelligence. He had the intelligence to follow Jesus in the first place; that's more that you can say for most of his contemporaries.

No, I think he was slow on the uptake because what he was expected to uptake was indeed utterly incomprehensible. Think about it – that the man who had come into his life – *his* life: this fisherman, this rustic -- was THE Son of God? That the Son of God had come to bear sin unto death? That the Son of God triumphed over sin and death and gained eternal life for himself and for all humanity? How many of us would have comprehended it? Regardless of how many times we were forewarned, how many of us would have comprehended it?

We would have disassociated from those forewarnings just as he did, because we all disassociates from what is incomprehensible. This is the whole reason that human progress has proceeded at worst haltingly and at best at a snail's pace. We all disassociation from what is incomprehensible.

Yet one thing is clear, once Peter got it, he got it, and he was on his way. And herein lies the lesson for us. Once we get it, once we fully and truly comprehend the incomprehensible – that Jesus Christ was crucified *for the sake of* the resurrection that through it the eternal reconciliation of all humanity has been made known – we will be on our way.

Because when we begin to live out that comprehension, the truth of God in Jesus Christ will be confirmed in our experience, and we will know that he walks beside us on our way as surely as did the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Amen.