

“BEYOND THE WALLS (#4): TO SAMARIA”

(Acts 1:8; Acts 10:1-23)

© 2007 Rev. Dr. Brian E. Germano

[PROP NEEDED: PPT of Concentric Mission Circles]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 9-30-07]

–I–

1. Read Texts: Acts 1:8; Acts 10:1-23 and Pray.
2. We’re currently in the midst of a sermon series called “Beyond The Walls” in which we’re exploring what it means for followers of Jesus to live out their faith beyond the structures of the institutional church.

A–We’ve been reminded that the “Church” of Jesus is not defined by buildings or worship services or institutional programs, but by God’s *people* being active and involved in the the community and world that surrounds us.

B–Last week, our guest preacher used the Acts 1:8 scripture (that we read today) to remind us that our work as Christians begins with us ministering to those in “*Jerusalem and Judea*” [POINT OUT ON PowerPoint...]- in other words, with people right here at home, in our own backyard, who’re very much like us. ¹

3. Well, today I want us to extend the circle a bit further to talk about our responsibility as Christians to minister with people in what today’s first scripture calls “*Samaria*” [POINT OUT ON PowerPoint...] – what I’m referring to as “*Samaritan*” ministry.

A–You may remember that in Jesus’ day, the Samaritans were considered half-breeds: they were neither fully Jewish, nor fully Gentile, and so were traditionally accepted by *neither*.

B–And yet, the gospels are full of stories of Jesus breaking through this barrier, ² and even in today’s first scripture (Acts 1:8) he specifically mentions “*Samaria*” as a mission field in which his followers (Christians) are to minister.

C–So all of this really begs the question for us: WHERE is our “*Samaria*”? And WHO are the “*Samaritans*” of our culture today?

1–Well, based on who they were and where they lived in *Jesus*’ time, I want to suggest that *today* they’re basically those who live close by, but with whom we traditionally have little or no dealings because they’re so *different* from us.

2–Perhaps they have a different skin color; or come from a different county; or speak a different native language; or who have more or less money than us; or even who dress radically different from us.

3–Whatever the differences, they’re usually strong enough to keep us from having meaningful friendships and relationships across racial, ethnic, and social lines.

4. Simon Peter had this problem. In today's second scripture from Acts 10, we hear his story, and how he (a disciple of Jesus, but nevertheless still *Jewish*) ...

A--...is essentially instructed by God in a vision to welcome and include Cornelius (a Roman military officer & a seeker of God, but nevertheless still a *Gentile*) as a brother in Christ.

1--You may remember that in that day and time, Jews were not allowed to have significant dealings or relationships with Gentiles, as they were considered socially and ethnically "unclean."³

2--And yet here, God specifically directs Peter to go and accept, minister to, and include this person (Cornelius) who lives right there in his own community, but who Peter to this point had had no dealings because the two were so very *different*.

B--Now, this is the essence of what we call "*Samaritan ministry*" – it's ministry to and with people who are fundamentally *different* from us, but who live and work right here among us, in our own backyard.

–II–

5. Did you know that today's American culture is more socially, racially, and ethnically diverse than in any other previous time in history?

A--In 1950, White-Caucasian America represented about 80% of our nation's population.

1--Today, that figure is around 68%, and current projections are that by the year 2050, White-American culture will represent only 53% of our society.⁴

2--23% are projected to be Latino/Hispanic, 14% Black/African-American, 9% Asian, and 1% Native-American.

3--And if these projections hold true, then in less than 75 years, White-Caucasians will be a racial *minority* in American culture.

B--In fact, the latest U.S. census reports that even today, there are over 156,000 non-White residents of Cobb Co. (26% of our population), representing over 20 major ethnic groupings.

C--70,000 of these were born outside the United States, and nearly 40,000 of them do not speak English well⁵ (*of course, some of US don't speak English very well, either!*)

6. But regardless, my point is that all of this has vast implications for the way we do Christian ministry.

A--On the one hand, it represents a great mission field ripe for harvest, for the vast majority of people in these ethnic groups are not currently active in any Christian faith tradition.

1–And even if some have been active in their native lands, they’re now far from home and far from the Christian influence they knew. Yet, the majority have never actively practiced Christian faith at all.

2–Jesus’ “Great Commission” in Matthew 28:19 tells us to “*make disciples of all nations.*” Well, today we have the unique situation in which the “*nations*” have actually come to *us*! The “world” is now *around & among* us in our own backyard!

3–So, we have a great opportunity as God’s church to reach new people in our own community with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

B–On the other hand, though, this growing cultural diversity also represents a great challenge for us as God’s church today, because most of our ministries – and in fact ...

1–...many of our own *personal* attitudes and perspectives – are not currently geared to effectively meet the unique challenges and needs of these emerging people cultures – they’re just too *different* from us and from what we’ve been used to.

2–Now, I must say: ...I believe *our* church is doing *much better* at this than many others (and better than we used to) by growing and expanding our partnership with our Kenyan Fellowship, with Lockheed Elementary School (which has a high % of Latino/Hispanic students), and other ministries.

3–But on the whole, we still have a lot of work to do to more effectively reach our “Samaria” and our “Samaritan” brothers and sisters living all around us.

C–It means that we must be willing to do ministry differently than how we have in the past – to be willing to re-valuate the ways we do worship, education, evangelism, and even leadership to effectively reach, accept, include, and minister with people and groups who are different than us.

–III–

7. As we do these things, a number of really great things will begin to happen,⁶ but perhaps the most important one I believe can best be described in a poem by Edwin Markham called “How the Great Guest Came.”

A–[“HOW THE GREAT GUEST CAME” STORY...]

I’m not going to quote the entire poem (it’s too long), but it basically tells the story of Conrad the cobbler who once had a dream that the Lord Jesus was coming to visit him. So to prepare, he washed & decorated the walls and shelves of his small shoemaker shop. On his table he set out milk, honey and bread (the best he could offer), and then sat down to wait for his guest, thinking how great he wanted to treat him when he came.

In the meantime, outside in the street, Conrad saw a poor barefoot beggar walking in the rain. He felt sorry for the man and called him in and gave him a pair of shoes. Next, he saw an old lady bent over as she carried a heavy load of firewood. So, he gave her the bread and helped her on her way. Then a lost, bewildered little child came to his door. He gave her milk from the cup on his table, and promptly led her home to her mother.

By then it was evening, and the old shoemaker still waited for Jesus to come. “Had the Lord forgotten?” he wondered sadly. Markham’s poem ends with these words:

*“Then soft in the silence a Voice he heard: ‘Lift up your heart, for I have kept my word.
Three times I came to your friendly door; Three times my shadow was on your floor.
I was the beggar with the bruised feet;
I was the woman you gave to eat;
I was the child on the homeless street!’”* ⁷

B—Friends, when we welcome, serve and minister to those around us who’re *different* than us, what we’re actually doing is **welcoming, serving, and ministering to Jesus himself.**

9. You see, both of today’s two scriptures remind us that God each and every one of us who follow him to be His Church by embracing ALL of His people.

A—So the question for us today is: with “Samaria” in our own backyard,...

B—... are we willing to open our hearts and our hands to serve and minister to our “Samaritan” brothers and sisters living in our very midst?

10. [PRAY]

11. [During closing song, invite congregants to complete and turn in the “SAMARITAN”-MINISTRY RESPONSE INSERT in the bulletin and bring forward...]

ENDNOTES:

1. Or at least like what we *could* be if we weren’t as fortunate.
2. Consider, for example, Jesus Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10), where the Samaritan is the hero of the story; Also remember the stories of the healed Samaritan leper who gave thanks when the other nine didn’t (Luke 17), and Jesus’ interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 3).
3. These Jewish social laws are found in Leviticus 11.
4. Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *The American Almanac*, p. 22, cited in Craig Kennet Miller, PostModerns: the beliefs, hopes, and fears of young americans (1965-1981), (Discipleship Resources, 1996), p. 126.
5. Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Cobb County, Georgia Table DP-1 (“Profile of General Demographic Characteristics: 2000”) and Table DP-2 (“Profile of Selected Social Characteristics: 2000”).
6. For example, in our PERSONAL life, we’ll find that...
 - #1) We’ll gain the **personal satisfaction of knowing that we’re reaching new people** for Jesus Christ who are not now being reached (and the joy that comes from this);
 - #2) When we accept, include, and minister to those who are different from us, it introduces **a new level of spiritual maturity and vitality** into our *own* life of faith;
 - #3) It **raises our own awareness/consciousness of who the Church is**, and what it’s really about – it’s not about *us*, but about *others*;

#4) It *opens the door for us to share our faith*, because other people will be curious and attracted by our welcoming and inclusive spirit towards those who are different.

In addition to these *personal* benefits, these same four can also be couched CORPORATELY as the following four advantages/benefits for a local community of faith (i.e., a local church) hosting immigrant ministries:

#1) The satisfaction of knowing that *our church is now reaching a new population for Jesus Christ* that is not now being reached;

#2) It introduces a *new level of spiritual maturity and vitality* into our own congregation;

#3) It *raises a consciousness as to who the body of Christ truly is*, and helps us see its global, “beyond us” quality;

#4) It demonstrates to our local community that *we are a church that is welcoming and open* to those who may be different to us (thereby appealing to a whole host of people attracted by that openness).

7. This is a summary of Edwin Markham’s poem “How The Great Guest Came, cited in Pulpit Resource Volume 7, Number .4, “Recognizing God,” p. 38. The poem can be found in its entirety at <http://www.biblebell.org/poems/poetryai.html#navigation>.