

## **1-8-17 "In Need of Help" A Reflection on Acts 10:34-43 by Mark Arbisi, Christ Church, KBK**

Babe Ruth. You know who he is right? Generally at least? Good. Kind of a heavyweight, right? Well, Babe Ruth is to baseball what Fred Craddock is to homiletics. "Homiletics" is a word for the academically inclined, but means simply "preaching". If there was a Hall of Fame for preachers you could go there and learn all about Fred Craddock. And as an aside, Fred Craddock is also a white guy, as in Caucasian; a little detail that may prove semi-revealing as we get into the story I'm about to share.

Craddock tells the story of the time he was invited to preach at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Memphis sometime in the '80; yes, that's the very same Ebenezer Baptist Church that was once pastored by the late, great Reverend Doctor MLK Jr. Craddock writes as follows:

"...the service moved to the point where I was to stand and speak. I'd moved to the pulpit and I had my New Testament (turned to Mark 8) ...and was ready to read, when Joe Roberts, the Pastor, who was seated up there along with several other persons, began to sing. Just as I was going to say my first word, he started singing, "I feel much better now that I've laid my burden down," and then he sang some more. Then the associates started singing, and the musicians went to their instruments, the piano and the organ and the drums and the electric guitar, and the people started singing. And I'm standing up there with Mark 8, waiting.

"Then, I suddenly realize, I'm the one up front, I'm the leader of this, so I started clapping my hands and singing. Then everybody stood up and started clapping their hands and swinging and singing, and it was just marvelous. Then at a certain point the Pastor, put his hand out, it got quiet, they sat down and I started preaching. I could've preached all day. Afterwards I said to Joe, "Well that kind of shocked me a little bit. You didn't tell me you were going to do that." He said, "Well, I didn't plan it." "Then why did you do it?" And he said, "Well, when you stood up there one of my associates leaned over to me and said, "That boy's gonna need some help."

And my friends that is not merely the story of the Gospel in a nutshell, that's the story of God's entire relationship with humanity in a nutshell. It don't matter who we are, what we are, a Hall of Fame'er or a farmer, a Martin Luther King Jr. or a Mark Arbisi, you gonna need some help. Period. Be you a brother or be you a sister, you can't do it alone—not a single thing worth doing; which is to say, nobody is up to sharing the joy and love and grace and good news of God's abundance and gifts without God in your back pocket. And you ain't finding God in your back pocket if you ain't got God front and center of your life—no way no how. And you're gonna need some help getting God front and center. Because merely standing there with Mark 8 and your tongue hanging out ain't going to cut it.

We hear of something along much the same lines in our famous Gospel story, the Baptism of Jesus. Jesus walks out of nowhere and walks up to the most unlikely of all Baptists, John knee deep in a creek, and with a wee bit of imagination we can listen in on the conversation taking place up in Heaven. We got the Spirit and the Father up there looking down on all this, on Jesus, so determined to get his ministry started on the right foot, filled to overflowing with mission enthusiasm and theological reformation. The Spirit then turns to the Father and says, "That boy's gonna need some help." So the Father responds, "You're absolutely right he is...so I'm sending you down in the form of a dove to land upon him and shine light on his path." And just so, there lies the grace and the blessing of every baptism—cuz, you and I and this Church and that Church are gonna need some help. As every person of faith can testify from their own life experience, without the empowerment, inspiration and wisdom they receives from God, good intentions eventually fall short, the best of ideas get lost to time, the most energetic missions run out of gas. In other words, at great detriment to us personally and to all humanity, we dismiss what help God has sent our way.

This morning's Epistle lesson begins with Peter standing up to preach (we know for a fact that he doesn't have Mark 8 in his hands but he very well may have had Isaiah 8, and as we hear, Isaiah anything is a darn good place to start preaching). And when he did, what came out of his mouth nobody saw coming! What came out of his mouth was as radical then as it most tragically remains today all these many years later. If Peter had been standing before a pastor and a congregation they may have started singing, "When will they ever learn."

You always know what's coming at you is huge when you hear the "truly" word, which is the word Peter begins his sermon with. Jesus is of course famous for his use of the truly word—and that's where Peter learned to say "truly". Time and again we hear Jesus saying "truly I tell you..." Which is Jesus' special intro to sharing some invaluable gem from God. "Truly" is of course biblical-ease for "listen up people...this is straight from the Big Guy people...you can't afford to miss this people. Really, really, really!" So "truly" says Peter. "I truly get it, I understand, the light bulb of all light bulbs has gone on, God shows no partiality!" Ca thud!

Now do with the word "partiality" whatever you wish, make it into "favoritism" for instance. God shows no favoritism. Or make into "prejudice," as in God shows no prejudice against anyone...and when you do that you start to get a clue as to the depth and the breath of this shocking, never before uttered, pronouncement and at that point, with any luck, you may ever glimpse some of the implications of divine impartiality. Because obviously the character of an impartial God means the true character of God's people is impartiality as well; which in today's world holds any number of implications. Among them no barring of Muslims, no building of walls, no limiting of affordable health care to anyone.

Simply put, we got a God here who doesn't play the "favorites game". No way, no how. Who saw that one coming? Well, Peter preaches that the ancient prophets had a clue, but no one else is much on board with it. It shouldn't, but it does after all tend to offend the sensitivities of the pious religious folk through the generations who struggle and sacrifice and worship and serve and give and give and give their whole life long, to be preached at by any preacher you care to name, that they are no closer to the front of the line for all their tremendous effort than anyone else...better Christ-like people, sure. We can give them that. People God is far more likely to smile on, sure. We'll give them that too. People who as a result know and value the will and mind and heart of God more than the average Jane or Joe. Sure, that's true too. But standing in a place of special privilege and honor, no. Forget it. Not going to happen because there is no partiality with our God. In like manner, "The first shall be last," as we know, remains a pill most find impossible to swallow. So "no partiality" is a lot like that...causing a most uncomfortable lump in the throat most of the time. Yet "truly" it is a pill that God wills for us to swallow.

The context of Peter's little "truly" sermon concerns the expansion of baptism to non-Jews. Peter was breaking brand new ground. Peter was breaking from untold generations of unquestioned religious tradition because, yes, Peter truly understood that God holds no prejudice against foreigners! Those strange, threatening, peculiar people from "away" need God's help too, as much as any Hebrew who could trace their lineage back to Abraham. And most blessedly, it turns out that it is in everyone's best interest if everyone receives God's help. Because then the world spins as one in Spirit.

This is radical good news people! God's generosity and provisions extend to everyone, each of us: peace to all nations, dignity to all religions, recognition of our common humanity to all peoples, forgiveness and liberation all around! All such things become the unquestioned foundation upon which we truly build that kingdom places so central to Jesus, so central therefore to our lives. You know, I think that there is a common misconception associated with baptism. As is widely understood, baptism is a rite that unites us in holy union with God and with the universal family of God. And yes, truly that is true enough, but there is so very much more that is so frequently not understood. But in light of Peter's sermon to us today perhaps you now understand: our baptisms *bind us to ALL of humanity* because that is precisely where God is both bound and found.

Indeed, Peter is saying, "the promise of great joy for ALL people" announced to the Shepherds in and around Bethlehem really, truly means what is really, truly being proclaimed at Jesus' birth. God intends great joy for all people.

Thanks be to God! Amen