



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“UNUSUAL KINDNESS”

Scripture Lessons: Acts 27:39-28:10

*This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, May 31, 2009.*

The text for today's sermon is Acts 28:2 where we read that following the shipwreck at the Island of Malta: "The natives treated us with unusual kindness." I know, that is a rather obscure text upon which to base a sermon and you won't get an argument out of me about that. I imagine as you listen this morning to the biblical account of Paul and Luke's dramatic shipwreck on Malta, what probably captured your attention was not the kindness or the friendship of the uncivilized natives, but rather how Paul survived the bite of a snake which is described a few verses later. I am not sure why we remember one over the other except for the fact that snakes are probably more intriguing than people, even those who are uncommonly kind. It's very hard to compete with snakes when it comes to grabbing attention. The natives at Malta have probably known that for years!

But if today's text could be accused of being obscure, it could also be accused of being rather inappropriate for a Sunday like this. After all, Pentecost is the church's birthday. It's the day we recall and celebrate how the Holy Spirit descended upon the church with dramatic power and equipped it for mission within the world. Ordinarily we spend Pentecost focusing quite rightly on Christians and upon the church of Jesus Christ --- not upon unregenerate natives who live on snake infested islands, regardless of how kind and hospitable they might be.

So why this text for today's sermon? Well, strange as it may seem, it has to do with Mahatma Gandhi, that strange little man who has been something of a hero for me for about 25 years, actually ever since I viewed Richard Attenborough's movie based on his life. If you ever visited my office before we packed it up this last week you may have noticed the poster of Gandhi on the wall listing his seven deadly social sins. The life of Gandhi is to me what the Maltese natives were to Paul and Luke --- a vivid reminder of how goodness and kindness often appear in unexpected places. The life of Gandhi is worthy of our consideration. Mohandas K. Gandhi, as you must know, was the half naked, 114 lb Hindu saint about whom Albert Einstein wrote: "Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon the earth."

Now in truth, another reason for my emphasis today actually does have to do with Pentecost and with a truth from that experience that we often overlook. Listen to Joel 2:28 and following where the day of Pentecost is prophesized. We hear these words again in Acts 2 when the prophecy is fulfilled:

“And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughter shall prophecy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even upon the menservants and maidservants in those days, I will pour out my Spirit.”

Now it is not unusual to hear these words quoted as a way of justifying that all Christians possess the Spirit, or better yet, are possessed by the Spirit. I have no argument with this. To be sure the church is the

special possession of God and without a doubt God's Spirit is operative in and through the lives of Christians and the corporate life of the church. But to say this is not to say enough!

Joel says "All flesh", which is to say not just all Jews or all Christians, but literally all people. It is my belief, as it is my reading of scripture and my understanding of some of the better Reformed theologians, that God's Spirit while present within the church, is certainly not restricted to the church. God's holy Spirit is free to indwell, to employ, and to manifest himself in any person, place or thing that the Spirit deems appropriate for God's purposes. The Spirit may indeed possess the church but let us never assume that God's Spirit is the possession of the church. To realize this is to lay the ground work for humility and respect when it comes to working with people who may not share our faith and may not even consider themselves members of any Christian church or worshipers of the living god. To recognize that God's Spirit is at work within the world at large and may very well employ those outside the church to accomplish God's will is to argue also that we have both the privilege and the duty of listening to and learning from people who may be quite different from us.

This may be something you have not considered before and it may even sound rather radical, but any serious student of the Bible will acknowledge that what I am saying is neither radical nor new. The Old Testament gives numerous examples of how God used those outside the pale of Judaism either to speak his word or to accomplish his will --- from Balaam's donkey, to Cyrus the Persian, to the godless Assyrian armies. And in the New Testament, does Jesus not praise the faith of the Roman Centurion? Was it not a Samaritan leper who alone returned to give thanks for his healing? Was it not Cornelius, a member of the Italian regiment who was given a vision from God that helped transformed the apostle Peter? And when the Pharisees complained to Jesus about how his disciples were praising God and rejoicing when Jesus entered Jerusalem and did not Jesus tell them: "I tell you that if these were silent the very stones would cry out!"

So why should we assume that simply because God's Spirit is present among us that he or she is not present among others? Why should we conclude that because God's Spirit can indwell and speak through us, it cannot indwell and speak through others as God desires? Why should Luke and Paul have been so startled by the unexpected kindness of the Maltese natives who, so far as we know, had never heard the gospel and may never have been exposed to the faith or ethics of Judaism. Surely Luke and Paul did not believe, intellectually at least, that the Holy Spirit did not make an appearance on the Island of Malta until they happened to become shipwrecked there. Surely they didn't believe that the Holy Spirit swam ashore from a sinking ship! And yet, they were unprepared for the kindness and hospitality and practical aid shown them by these strange people so different from themselves.

I don't know if you can identify with Luke and Paul as they encounter such unexpected kindness in such an unfamiliar people, but I certainly can. I never cease to be amazed at how some people outside the church, and indeed outside of any church, display qualities of godliness and manifest the traits of God's Spirit within their lives. We know from Paul that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patients, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And while all of these virtues ought to be evident in the lives of Christians, let us never think or assume that we have a monopoly on them. Even pagan natives can show uncommon kindness to strangers in need. People who may never have heard of God by name can be patient, gentle and self-controlled. What is more, people who refer to God by some name strange to us can also be peace lovers and peacemakers. They can be good, decent, compassionate, considerate people. Why? I believe it is because at least to some extent, whether they know it or not, these people are touched by the Spirit of God that is written into the very warp and woof of life.

Now please don't miss understand what I am saying or read something into my remarks that I do not intend. I am not saying there is a spark of divinity in all persons that only needs to be encouraged through education or culture so that inherently good people will reach their latent potential. My understanding of the doctrine of sin and human depravity will not allow me to take that position. Neither am I saying that all

religions have equal integrity and value with respect to ethics and morality, and therefore we can simply pay our money and take our choice because a good Buddhist is no different from a good Christian. I don't believe that either and history would not bear it out. Another thing I am not saying is that all people are more or less spiritual. Nor do I mean to imply that some people are so down right good that they deserve to be saved. What I am saying is that there are some people outside our faith who are extremely sensitive to and responsive to the Spirit of the living God, which happens to be the source of all truth and goodness and holiness.

Another way of dealing with this phenomenon is to speak in terms of grace rather than in terms of the Spirit of God. John Calvin and other Reformed theologians have spoken of common grace as distinguished from to special or saving grace. Common grace is present within the entire created order and operative among all creatures. It serves both to restrain what is evil and to promote what is good. When we speak of "common decency" or "common sense" or the inner sense of right and wrong, even among heathens, these are but expressions of common grace. The healing process within nature, the body's built-in immunization system, the environment's capacity to cleanse itself of poison and pollutants, the protection of the elderly and young in practically all cultures --- these too are manifestations of the common grace of God. Because of this grace kindness can often be experienced in unexpected places and virtues that you and I would call Christian can be evidenced in the lives of practically any person upon the earth.

I told you that Luke and Paul were unprepared for the uncommon kindness they discovered on Malta. When I viewed Richard Attenborough's movie on Gandhi I was frankly unprepared for the force of moral and spiritual integrity so evident in the life of this little man. I sat in that movie for nearly three hours completely memorized by one who does not identify with the God I serve and yet who seemed to incarnate in his very life so many of the fruits of the Spirit that I mentioned previously. Since viewing Attenborough's movie I have done additional reading on the life and work of Gandhi, both personal and public, and my admiration for him has only increased, as has the haunting quality of the life that he lived.

I say haunting because for a while Gandhi seemed as threatening as he did inspirational to me. There was such a dignity and commitment to his life, such a concern for people and such a sacrificial single-mindedness that I was tempted to view this man and his work as a gauge of the relative merits of the Hindu religion versus the Christian ethic. And when I put my own life and witness beside his I was shamed by the stark contrast, even though I professed to be a devoted disciple of Jesus Christ. Now I would love to baptize Gandhi as a Christian posthumously, since I know how greatly he was influenced by the Sermon on the Mount and how much he admired Jesus. And I know as well that Christian authors like Leo Tolstoy and John Ruskin also had a profound impact upon Gandhi and his convictions. Yet we should not speak of Gandhi as anything other than what he claimed to be --- a devout Hindu who also was indebted to other religions for his beliefs and life principles.

And so, for a while, the movie and the man called Gandhi seemed to call into question the validity of my own religion, which I confess had not convicted or transformed me to the same extent that Gandhi's religion did him. I was somewhat embarrassed to realize that there is so much we Christians could learn from Gandhi about simplicity, about humility, about human dignity, about self-discipline and non-violence, about vicarious suffering and sacrificial love.

Then suddenly something wonderful and liberating dawned upon me and it enabled me to gain a new perspective on and a new appreciation for Mahatma Gandhi. (Mahatma is not actually apart of Gandhi's name but rather an honorific conferred upon him meaning "Great Soul".) What I realized was that while I did not agree with all of Gandhi's ideas and principles, the traits within his life that I found so appealing and inspirational and which exposed my own inadequacies at the same time were precisely those eternal truths that Jesus Christ taught and incarnated. I saw that Gandhi's life and work were not so much a challenge to Christianity as they were a confirmation of it, a genuine outworking of the gospel truths in the life of a

humble little man who just happened to be a religious outsider. Like the natives of Malta, here was one who happened to be extremely sensitive to the Spirit of the living God.

In conclusion, let me simply challenge you on this Pentecost Sunday to join with me in resisting the notion that Christians have a monopoly on truth and goodness or that there is nothing we can learn from others, from other religions and from other people quite dissimilar from ourselves. Let me invite you in the spirit of Pentecost to join with me in listening and looking for the Spirit of God wherever and whenever the Spirit chooses to speak, be it though Christians or non-Christians, be it in expected or unexpected places. And finally let us all gladly celebrate and embrace that common grace of God which infuses all of creation and all of life with the goodness and truth and beauty of the living Lord. After all, God's Spirit has been poured out upon "all flesh!"

Prayer: Heavenly Father, for as much as without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant us your Holy Spirit that he may in all things rule and direct our hearts and minds and equip us to recognize his presence and power in the life and lives about us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.