

Remarkable Gentile Rockets

Easter 5C: Acts 11.1-18

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Oscar Wilde wrote a wonderful little cautionary tale about some fireworks that were about to be set off at a royal wedding. The fireworks actually have most of the speaking parts in the story, although a few living creatures show up at the duck pond near the end.

A rambling conversation about the wideness of the world and the death of romance commences between the Roman candle and the Catharine Wheel. And a firecracker called a Squib holds forth on the way travel broadens the mind and does away with prejudice. Then, with a bid for attention in the form of a sharp, dry cough, the Remarkable Rocket makes his entrance. He's actually the character for whom the story is named.

The rocket is remarkable, we soon learn, by his own estimation, as he thinks the royal wedding is actually an occasion to celebrate the day of his own explosion, not the other way around. And what he hates most is when attention gets paid to anyone besides himself.

It's a terrific premise, isn't it? Some fireworks see their purpose as the celebration of others. One, at least, thinks he was literally made to draw attention to himself. He revels in the oohs and the aahs he will one day attract.

Oscar Wilde's Remarkable Rocket is delightfully un-subtle in his need for attention. When he loses his train of thought in one conversation, he asks, "What was I saying?"

"You were talking about yourself," replied the Roman Candle.

"Of course; I knew I was discussing some interesting subject when I was so rudely interrupted..."

A little later, the firecracker says she is laughing because she is happy, and the rocket says, "That is a very selfish reason. What right have you to be happy? You should be thinking about others. In fact, you should be thinking about me. I am always thinking about myself, and I expect everybody else to do the same."

By the story's end, we're not entirely surprised or disappointed to find our little Rocket sinking into the mud by the duck pond, trying to convince a Dragonfly and a Frog of his remarkable-ness. Shortly before he literally fizzes out, he tells the Dragonfly, "I am not going to stop talking to [the frog] merely because he pays no attention. I like hearing myself talk. It is one of my greatest pleasures. I often have long conversations all by myself, and I am so clever that sometimes I don't understand a single word of what I am saying."

The story reminds me, in a way, of the one in Luke where a Pharisee looks over at a Tax Collector and prays, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector." It's equally un-subtle. The danger in both stories is that the characters are so one dimensional that we might not recognize anything of ourselves in the bad guys. But sometimes stark pictures are just what we need to name something in us or in our world that we keep ignoring or justifying or explaining away.

Don't worry. I know the gospel isn't from Luke 8 today. But as I was reading our passage from Acts this week, I had been thinking about attention. Who, in your world, expects to receive attention, and who is expected to give it? Who deserves more than they get, and who will never be satisfied, no matter how much attention they receive? What social structures and sets of expectations determine who has to pay attention to whom? Which is just another way of establishing who matters more, is it not? What is deference, after all, but submission to a hierarchy of attention?

You're probably still confused about what any of this has to do with eating with the uncircumcised and Peter's vision of a small herd of non-kosher animals being lowered from heaven on a sheet. And I'm guessing more than a few of you have decided that this sermon isn't worth giving much more of your attention. But the story we just read from Acts 11 is also not very subtle. Neither is the fact that I am indisputably a Gentile.

If you happen to be a Gentile too, sit with this simple, obvious, difficult fact for a moment. Christians are so used to aligning ourselves with the insiders in Bible stories. And a lot of us Christians are pretty wealthy and powerful in this time and place. But the primary kind of attention Jesus's disciples would have been used to paying to the likes of us was suspicion. We're the ones it was hard for the first Jewish Christians to wrap their minds around including. We are the foreign ones. We are the unclean.

Another way a modern Gentile Christian can distort the New Testament is to think that Jews were dying to be delivered from the constraints of the Law. I'd think Peter would be thrilled to suddenly get to attend the Memphis in May barbecue contest. But that's a measure of just how disconnected I am from this story by virtue of the culture I've been formed in.

Read the story again. Peter doesn't feel liberated. He's a little terrified and disgusted by the vision. He says he's never let anything profane or unclean enter his mouth. I'm guessing that on a gut level, having all foods be declared clean to Peter was about what it would be like for you and me to be told it's now perfectly fine to eat horse meat. Now I've got your attention, don't I?

I'm not just being cute. If you can stomach it, endure this little thought experiment a little longer. Being the open, inclusive, welcoming folk that we try to be, imagine someone from a faraway country joining Calvary and showing up to a potluck dinner with pot of roast horse. Do you still think we're beyond cultural hangups about clean and unclean foods? Still think being inclusive is easy if you're just a reasonably decent Christian person?

I don't think we can read Acts 11 in a meaningful way until we're in this uncomfortable frame of mind. Or, rather, unless our stomach is churning uncomfortably with a deep, culturally formed revulsion. But then, if you're a Gentile like me, we have to go a step further. We have to remember that we're the ones who have brought roast horse to the potluck. We're the revolting ones in this story. We're the ones it's going to take a whole lot more than good manners to welcome fully into the household of God.

And here's why I wanted to introduce the question of attention into the story. Attention works in a very similar way, doesn't it? Who gets attention is culturally determined, to a large extent, and it works on a deep instinctual level in ways we rarely acknowledge consciously. There are also all kinds of shared values and power structures embedded in the ways we give and receive attention.

Imagine now ... no more horse meat. I promise ... Imagine now that Ja Morant or Justin Timberlake or, I don't know, Julie Andrews walked into this room, since we're going with J names. To be a celebrity is to command attention, isn't it? It's a form of power that's culturally formed and transmitted. Even with no formal rules about how deference should be paid by the likes of us to the likes of them, we'd pay them plenty of it, even if only by trying our best not to stare at them for the rest of the service.

But even if we're not celebrities, per se, we know when we're the person in a situation who expects to receive the attention, and when we're the one expected to give it, don't we?

More than 40 years ago, a sociologist named Charles Derber wrote a little book titled *The Pursuit of Attention*. It began with this sentence: "Without attention being exchanged and distributed, there is no social life." Oscar Wilde's "Remarkable Rocket" mocked the absurd ways attention was exchanged in the late 19th century English aristocratic society. A century later, Charles Derber worried that in a highly individualized American culture, we're all in a never ending competition for attention. And this was still several decades, remember, before the invention of Facebook and reality TV.

Derber's researchers observed countless hours of ordinary human interactions. In most ways their findings were anything but surprising. They found that children were expected to pay attention to elders in ways that elders were not obliged to pay to children. They also found that Oliver Wendell

Holmes's characterization of the 19th century patriarch as the "autocrat of the breakfast table" was still largely true at breakfast tables a century later. Fathers had the most latitude in deciding when and to whom they would pay attention. But they also noted that in praising women for the higher levels of attention they tend pay in relationships compared to men, an implicit power imbalance is being sustained and probably even strengthened. Remember, the ones least obligated to pay attention, and who most expect to receive it, are almost always the most powerful ones in any social interaction.

OK, that's more than enough 40 year old sociology filtered through one preacher's murky understanding. But how many times did Jesus tell a parable, or give a teaching to a powerful person in terms of wealth or influence or religious authority, that exposed how the world pays attention and deference in ways that have absolutely nothing to do with the values of God? How many times did Jesus disrupt those unspoken agreements on behalf of the first ones to be ignored and dismissed?

To whom and to what do you pay your attention? From whom do you expect attention to be paid to you? And what happens when you don't receive it? Maybe for you, as they do for me, the answers to these questions expose how we're not being formed in this culture in anything like the way of Jesus. We're being formed as Remarkable Rockets, competing for attention first and foremost for ourselves. As a straight, white, educated, Christian, American man, I need to stay especially awake to the fact that I'm being formed to expect attention to turn quickly and often in my direction. I may need to spend even more time in prayer, entering the story of Acts as a Gentile, as an outsider, as a person the community would assume to be unclean, worthy of only the most suspicious kind of attention. Because Jesus so persistently turned his attention away from those who assumed they deserved it, and directed it toward those used to going unseen.

You may need to pray your way into the story differently. But since the theme is so pervasive in the Bible, from the first pages to the last, I do believe each one of us would do well to enter this story with at least some part of ourselves we can't imagine anyone would ever welcome or pay loving attention to, especially God. We need to bring to the story our unclean, Gentile, outsider self, the self that may hope neither God nor good people will even notice us. The self who may think we'd be better off if attention were withheld altogether. So that that self can hear the Jews in Acts 11 not only seeing the likes of us for who we are, and receiving the likes of us as we are, but even offering up their astonished praise, saying, "Can you believe it?! God has given even to those Gentiles the repentance that leads to life! In the end, there may be no one in all the cosmos God's redeeming love in Christ doesn't notice, doesn't save, doesn't bring alive!"