

BEAMONESQUE

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

Acts 11:1-18

April 28, 2013

Forty five years ago at the Olympic Games in Mexico City a feat was performed that many believe to be the greatest Olympic feat in the history of the games. Sports Illustrated considered it one of the top five sports accomplishments in the 20th century. Bob Beamon, a student at the University of Texas-El Paso, represented the United States in the Long Jump event. Beamon was considered a top long jumper, and though he was a favorite in the event he was not a record holder. The long jump record going into the event was 27 feet, 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. In the semi-finals Beamon foot-faulted twice and almost did not qualify for the finals, but he did on his third jump. In the finals on his first jump with the hopes that maybe he could win the gold, and maybe he could set a new world's record by a couple of inches – because no one sets a long jump record by more than a couple of inches – Bob Beamon on his first jump jumped 29 feet, 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches – surpassing the record not by two inches, but by over 21 inches – nearly two feet. He had outjumped the electronic measuring device. It took them nearly a half hour to calculate precisely the distance. And when Beamon was told the distance – how he had broken the record by nearly two feet – he fell into a fit of cataplexy – an emotional convulsion that left him collapsed on the track. So great was this distance, so great was this propulsion past the limits of human ability and comprehension, that the sporting world, along with Beamon, were left in a state of shock. A new word was coined as a result – Beamonesque. When a person reaches so far beyond a limit, performs an act of such historical enormity – it is considered Beamonesque.

And maybe that is the word that should come to mind when we read the apostle Peter telling his story where he explains to his Jewish brothers and sisters why he has gone to the home of a Gentile and sat at table with his family and baptized them. It is hard to overstate the Grand Canyon divide there was in the first century Palestinian world between Jews and Gentiles – especially as seen by the Jews. The history of the Jews had been a history of claiming a unique identity and a lineage from the parentage of

Abraham and Sarah. Theirs was a culture of setting themselves apart from the peoples of the world – seeing themselves as the Chosen people. Chosen by God and commanded by God to carry out of life of habit and ritual that would set them apart from the Gentiles – and in particular in the first century – the Romans, who not only were Gentiles but claimed Caesar as God and had occupied Palestine. You probably could not imagine in the first century a greater distance – than the distance to be found between an orthodox follower of Judaism and, let's say, a Gentile, Roman, military official. And yet this is Peter's story. A story that begins in Joppa – the town we talked about last week – where Peter sees a vision of non-Kosher, unclean food, lowered from heaven and he hears the voice of God who says, "Kill and eat." This, of course, is diametrically opposed to every and any sense that this orthodox follower of Judaism would have within him. Nothing could be more defiling. But the voice won't go away. The voice won't go away. The voice keeps inviting Peter to take a leap. To leap a distance no Jew has ever leaped. The voice just won't go away. And so comes a knock on the door and the invitation to come to Caesarea and to the home of a Gentile. And not just a Gentile but a Roman Gentile. And not just a Roman Gentile but a Centurion Roman Gentile. The face of the enemy. The face of the occupation. The face of the unclean. It is the voice that won't go away. It is the vision that won't go away.

Strangely enough when Luke tells this story in chapter 10 – Peter is quick to remind himself what the Bible says. And what his Hebrew scriptures say – is that this is the wrong thing to do. It is just wrong to cross this Grand Canyon of cultural and religious divide. It cannot be supported by Peter's Bible. And yet the voice won't go away. The vision won't go away. And he is convinced that this is the Holy Spirit that is speaking.

And maybe he remembers that time when Jesus led them up to the land of the pagans – the land of the Gentiles – up near the towns of Tyre and Sidon – Northwest Palestine. And there they are accosted by a Gentile woman, a Canaanite woman – who desperately pleads for Jesus to cross the Grand Canyon and heal her sick daughter. And because Jesus knows his Bible he knows it is the wrong thing to do – to have anything to do with Gentiles. He had come, he thought, to the lost sheep of Israel. But somehow the voice of the pleading and desperate Gentile mother becomes the voice of the Father and the voice just won't go away. The voice won't go away. The desperate mother won't let him go until he leaps. And the voice says

that maybe the love of the Father has more distance to travel than just the confines of the Jews. It's why he's up in Gentile land. So the rabbi leaps his Beamon-esque leap.

Maybe that is what Peter remembers when the vision comes and the voice speaks. This Beamon-esque leap of Jesus. John tells us in his Gospel that "Love my sheep" were the last words that Jesus spoke directly to Peter. Love my sheep. And maybe it was that journey to Gentile land, or maybe it was that journey to Samaritan land where Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well – maybe it was those leaps – that helped Peter to figure out that when Jesus says "my sheep" he means everybody.

It's the voice that won't go away.

So before he knows it he is sitting at table with the Centurion Roman Gentile passing the pulled pork – and baptizing this household that so badly wants to be included in the great story of God's limitless love. He knows he will catch heck for it back home. The Jerusalem followers will not understand. It's not in the Bible they will say. No good Jew could ever jump that far. And Peter will tell them that it is amazing how far you can jump when you know that the Holy Spirit is behind you. Pentecost wasn't that long ago, he will say. Don't you remember?

It really is hard to outleap the limitless love of God.

This past year the world laid to rest two great pioneers of unfathomable distance. One was a pioneer propelled by the human mind. The other was a pioneer propelled by the human heart. The first was a man who after serving as an Air Force officer joined the communities of Mercury and Gemini and Apollo and became an astronaut and joined the generations and generations of those who looked into the sky to the orb a million miles away and wondered could anyone ever make such a Beamon-esque leap? The voice of science, the voice of the mind, said yes. And the voice would not go away. From Galileo to Orville Wright to Alan Shepard to John Glenn – the voice would not go away. Until finally came the day

when a young boy from Ohio walked down the steps of the landed Eagle – and Neil Armstrong jumped onto the moon’s surface and said, “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.” *Beamonesque* you might say. Propelled by the human brain and the voice that wouldn’t go away.

Years later an old man looked into this past and saw things he did not want to see. He had been a member of the Ku Klux Klan back in the throes of the Civil Rights movement. So far was he from any openness to the equality of the races that he made it his mission to bring violence upon those who sought racial justice. He laid in wait at the bus terminal in Rock Hill, South Carolina for a bus load of Freedom Riders, blacks and whites, who traveled together to bring models of desegregation to a segregated south. When a black man and his white friend stepped off the bus and dared enter together a whites only waiting area – that was Edwin Wilson’s prompting to let loose a violent beating upon the men. He beat them terribly.

How could Edwin Wilson in that moment ever imagine that fifty years later a black man would be President? And how could he imagine that such an election in a country he so dearly loved would show him how wrong he had been? And how could he have known that the black man he beat in Rock Hill, SC would end becoming a highly respected U.S. Congressman – John Lewis? And how could he know that the heart inside him, fueled once by such hatred would someday become fueled – he would say – by the Holy Spirit and would propel him the unfathomable distance between where he had once been to the office of an African-American Congressman pleading for forgiveness. And how could he ever believe that that once beaten Congressman would reach back the same distance and grant the dearly sought forgiveness. *Beamonesque*. Propelled by the human heart and the voice that would not go away. Strange isn’t it?-the distance of the heart can sometimes seem much further than the distance of the mind.

It makes one think of the great Arab Muslim leader Anwar Sadat – President of Egypt – having risen to that rank on a record of an early terrorist life. But there came the time when the voice spoke. And the voice wouldn’t go away. And the voice said, Go to Israel and make peace. But nothing in his past would say that that was the right thing to do. But the voice wouldn’t go away. Until the day that he boarded a plane and traveled to Jerusalem. As the crow flies it is 250 miles ... but as history records it, a flight of a

million miles. Beamonesque. Propelled by the human heart. Later it was Anwar Sadat who said sometime before his martyrdom – “When a man’s heart is animated by love he is naturally impelled to accomplish his vocation. Without love, a man may grow very old indeed and yet feel he hasn’t lived at all; he would feel he has missed a very important thing – that, however great his achievement, he has really achieved nothing.”

Love animates. Love impels.

What good news for you and me who make up the church of the 21st century – that we have born into a tradition of Beamonesque leaps. We are here because a good orthodox follower of Judaism – heard the voice and followed the voice. And leaped a million miles into a new universe. Sat at table with unclean food. Baptized those who were once far off. And proclaimed the good news that God shows no partiality. Did you hear that? God shows no partiality. There is no person, there are no people outside the loving embrace of the Father.

It is something I know I need to hear. Because I am guessing there may be peoples in my life that my prejudice would see as too far away. That my prejudice would see as too far different. That my prejudice would see as too unclean. And if my life has been identified by my effort to keep those people away – then this good news of God’s limitless love – might sound to me like bad news. It may feel even unbiblical. The leap, *Beamonesque*. Unattainable. But then I read in my Bible this question the apostle asked himself when he was sitting at the Roman General’s table. The last place he ever thought he’d be. This question that the voice keeps repeating to me. And the question is this – who am I to think that I could hinder God? Who am I that I could hinder God? It’s God’s love were talking about, not mine. He is the animator. He is the propeller. Who am I that I could hinder God? I should know better. We should know better. We the Church of Jesus Christ. It is our tradition, these Beamonesque leaps. And who can imagine any of our leaps coming close to the leap once taken by a young follower of Judaism who saw the vision and heard the voice. And invited you and me—once so far off, into the Kingdom of God.