

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Epiphany 1 -- Baptism of Jesus -- January 9th and 12th, 2014

Acts 10:34-38 (NIV – 1984)

³⁴Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. ³⁶You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—³⁸how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

Dear Children of God,

Christianity is often accused of being exclusive. Those accusations are right. Christianity is absolutely exclusive. It is the only religion that is absolutely exclusively inclusive. Huh? What did I just say? Christianity is absolutely exclusively inclusive. No other religion in the world (absolutely exclusively) is as inclusive (for everybody) as Christianity is. Some religions cater only to the rich...others aim at good people....still others target those who give generously...others aim at members of certain tribes, languages, social classes. Only Christianity (exclusively) is for all people (inclusive). Today we are going to see that point through the ministry of Peter as we see that:

Theme: Jesus Came For All People

- 1. His forgiveness is given for all people**
- 2. Only through faith do we receive his blessings**

Today's epistle reading is one of the proofs of that. Peter was sent to the house of Cornelius – a Roman centurion. Now the Romans were hated only a little less than Samaritans were by the Jews. The Romans were the nation who brutalized Israel. Cornelius was a Roman Centurion who, although a Gentile, worshipped the true God. He had sent for Peter to tell him about God's Messiah. Peter, upon the command of God, went to the home of Cornelius and spoke to him about Christ. He told Cornelius, **“You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached: God anointed Jesus from Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were under the tyranny of the devil, because God was with him.”**

Wasn't Peter being exclusive? Shouldn't he have been politically correct and told Cornelius that he was a good guy and his religious ideas were just as good as Peter's? Shouldn't Peter have praised Cornelius' spirituality and not been so exclusive to talk only about Jesus? Sometimes the right teaching of God's Word is called narrow-minded. But how loving is it to tell someone a lie, just because that's what they want to hear? The truth is actually the most inclusive. A lie includes only those who agree to hold the lie. The truth is for everyone.

Our text says, **“Then Peter began to speak: I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.”** The passage we know so well says the same thing, “God so loved the whole world that he gave his one and only son.” The “world” includes all people, good or bad, all nationalities, social levels. Jesus died on the cross to save all

people. He accepts all people because through baptism He cleanses all people equally. That's why the water in baptism is a wonderful outward example of what the gospel is doing spiritually within that person. Water washes everyone doesn't it? It doesn't selectively choose clean people to make cleaner. It doesn't chose rich people to make clean. It cleans all people. The Gospel's forgiveness is for all people – no one is excluded. Would Hitler be forgiven? Why not? Just think about it, If God can forgive you for all your sins, why couldn't He forgive Hitler, the person on death row, or the neighbor next store or anyone else?

Who appreciates being washed? Those who know how dirty they are. If you're gone camping for a week and haven't had a shower or a bath – you can't wait to get washed. But if you're sitting around all day, taking a bath doesn't do much for you. In baptism we have the guilt and eternal consequences of our sins washed away. **“Be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins...the promise is for you and your children”** (Acts 2). **“[Baptism] now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God”** (1 Peter 3:21).

Today we are celebrating the Baptism of Jesus and Peter in his talks with Cornelius refers to Christ's baptism. The baptism of Jesus was a very important event. It marked the beginning of Christ's great work as the promised Messiah. John the Baptist, who baptized Jesus, said concerning the baptism of Christ, **“I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, “The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.”** [John 1:32-34]

It was necessary for Jesus to be baptized to fulfill the Father's plan and will obediently. The baptism of Jesus was also a means by which Jesus identified himself with the sinners he came to save. In his baptism, Jesus was declared to be the Son of God, the only Son of God. **“This is my beloved Son”** the voice from heaven said.

The Bible teaches that Jesus was the only begotten Son. All other people are adopted children of God. In our baptism, you and I become the adopted children of God. Our relationship with God is transformed in baptism. Through our baptism, there is a new familiarity, closeness and intimacy with God.

For non-denominational churches and Baptist churches baptism is so unimportant that they refuse to baptize infants. They want to wait until a child is older to be baptized. They want to let the child grow up until they are old enough to “make a decision for themselves.” We have some adoptive parents here at ST. Luke's and I know that they celebrated when they adopt a child into a family. They didn't wait until an infant becomes of age and then ask them whether or not they want to be part of a family. No. If they receive the child as a baby, they adopted them as a baby.

And so it is with God. God wants us to be baptized or adopted as a baby. Christianity is so inclusive it even includes babies. In baptism God takes the initiative. The relationship is totally transformed. Baptism is the fantastic invitation from God to know us intimately and closely, so closely that we are called son or daughter, that we become family.

When you come home from work and your little ones come running to you and throw their arms around you and give you a big hug or kiss, you think this is my child -- my heart's delight. As Jesus was baptized, I can see God up in heaven, looking down at Jesus, his child, and saying, “This is my beloved Son my heart's delight.” And so it is when you and I are baptized. God looks down at you and me and says, “This is my beloved son, this is my beloved daughter, my heart's delight.” What parents wouldn't want God to say that about their baby.

God says through Zephaniah the Old Testament prophet, **“The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will be speechless because He loves you so much, he will rejoice over you with singing.”** (3:17) We think of our feelings towards our baby children and we think of God’s feelings for his own child. That is the same way that God feels about you and me, whether we are eight days old, eight months, eight years, eighteen years, twenty-eight years, thirty-eight, forty-eight, fifty-eight, eighty-eight. No matter what our age may be, this is God’s fundamental attitude towards us is this: delight.

God is not concerned about a person’s background. God is not impressed by nationality or by a people’s customs and ordinances. God is the One who has created all people and all nationalities. Furthermore, when God sent his Son to be the Savior, he sent him to be the Savior of all people. Christ Jesus died for all people, rich and poor, criminal and saint alike. **“God our Savior wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”** [1 Timothy 2:4] God’s forgiveness isn’t just for repentant people. He includes even the unrepentant in His forgiveness. They are the ones who reject it. They exclude themselves from God’s wish to include them. God’s forgiveness isn’t just for believers. He includes even the unbeliever in His forgiveness. They however, reject it. God loved the whole world and so sent His Son. He includes everyone.

This means that God loves the murderer. This means that God loves the adulterer. This means that God loves the homosexual. This means that God loves the crooked politician and the corrupt banker. This means that God loves the worst sinner and the most hardened criminal. This means God even loves you.

We need to be careful on how we view people. If we start to think critical about someone, we need to catch ourselves and say, “That’s a man that God loves” or “That’s a woman that Jesus died for.” So if God is willing to include this person in His life and love, then we can’t do any less than that either. That makes all the difference in how we will treat them.

As our text continues, we know that Peter continued to preach to Cornelius and the many who gathered around him. It was hard for the Jews to reaccept that God’s forgiveness is for all people – both Jews and Gentiles. While Peter preached, the hearts of those who heard him were changed by the Holy Spirit and they realized that God’s grace was for all people. Cornelius, a Gentile, was then baptized and his heart was washed clean. As we live our lives, may we always recognize that God’s grace is a gift for us. Through our baptism, we are made children of God – not because we deserve it, but by his complete grace and mercy. Thank goodness, God wants all to be saved and his message of Jesus continue to work. May we like Peter wonder over God’s wonderful grace that has not only chosen us but is meant for all people. Christianity is absolutely exclusively inclusive. Amen