

Acts 10:34-38 *Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. ³⁶You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷You know what has happened throughout the province of 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 friends in Christ our Savior,

For Peter, the light was starting to dawn. It took him awhile, but he was finally getting it. He knew Jesus as his Savior. He understood that Jesus had come down to this earth to win salvation for him. He fully understood that in Jesus he and his people had forgiveness for all of their sins and were guaranteed to live with God forever in heaven. He had witnessed Jesus' work and ministry firsthand. He saw the miracles. He was witness to a partial glimpse of Jesus' full glory on the Mount of Transfiguration and heard the voice of God confirm Jesus as His Son. He saw him dead on the cross. He touched his hands and feet and saw him alive on Easter Sunday. He stood there and watched with his own eyes as Jesus ascended into heaven. He knew that this was the God who saved him and the Lord who ruled over his life. He knew that he was the Messiah sent by God to be the King of the Jews and rule over God's people.

What he hadn't understood was that God's people included more than just the people of Jewish descent. God didn't play favorites. He didn't send Jesus to be just the Savior of the Jews, but the Savior of the world. It took a special vision from God to help Peter understand this. These words are spoken by Peter to a man named Cornelius. Cornelius was a Roman Centurion—a very unlikely candidate to be counted among God's people. Yet, we are told that he and his family were God-fearing and devout. They believed in the God of the Jews and respected and followed their moral teachings. Being a Gentile, Cornelius knew quite a bit about the Jewish beliefs and he knew a lot about Jesus. But he was missing the best part—the full Gospel message of the good news of salvation. He hadn't quite connected the dots that Jesus had achieved salvation for him with his life, death, and resurrection. God had Peter in mind to be the one who would share the good news with Cornelius and his family and help them connect the dots.

But it was a peculiar thing for Peter to go to the house of a Gentile and proclaim the Gospel to them. The Old Testament law specifically stated that going into the house of a Gentile made one unclean before God. Peter grew up in a society which believed that God only cared about the Jews and accepted them simply because they were Jews and God rejected the Gentiles simply because they were Gentiles. Peter was taught that God showed favoritism and his favorites were the Jews. Peter was taught to judge the externals and thought God would judge the same way. But God didn't. He didn't send Jesus into this world only for the Jews. Jesus came for all people. And God was using this opportunity to not only teach Peter but the rest of the Christian world that this salvation was for all people. Before he sent Peter to Cornelius, God gave him a vision. In that vision, Peter saw a sheet that had all kinds of animals that had been forbidden in the Old Testament for God's people to eat. Peter was told to kill the animals and eat them. And when he responded that he wasn't allowed to do that, God replied, "*Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.*" This happened two more times to reinforce for Peter that what was forbidden and unclean in the Old Testament was made clean by Jesus. This helped Peter to come to the understanding that God accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right. He was starting to get it that it is not the externals that make someone a member of God's family. It's what's on the inside—what is in the heart—that matters. Cornelius and his family would be members of God's family because in their heart, they worshipped the true God and looked to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior from sin. With this understanding, Peter put himself in an uncomfortable and perhaps even awkward situation to be able to share with Gentile people the full Gospel message of peace through what Jesus had done.

Do we get it? Do we understand that this message of peace which God brought to us in Jesus is not just for our ears to hear but for all people? Do we recognize that Jesus is not just our Lord, but the Lord of all people? Do we grasp that God accepts all people—regardless of their background, race, economic or social level, job, gender, age or whatever other designation you might come up with—who fear him and do what is right? Do we understand it to the point where we are moved to do something to help people hear about their Savior and learn about his love? Do we get it?

I ask this question because I think it's important that we evaluate our actions to see if they coincide with our beliefs. I read this quote once: "To know and not do, is truly not to know." If we know what God wants of us and yet do nothing with it, we truly don't know what God wants. The buzz word for this in our world is authenticity. That's what people want to know. Do I have an authentic faith? Is my faith so real that it moves me to do something about it? There's the story of a pastor in our church body who came to know Jesus through a Bible Information Class. He was so moved by the message he heard about Jesus he responded this way: "If what you are telling me about Jesus is true, and I believe that it is, then I have no choice but to quit my career and study to become a pastor so that I can share this message full time." That's an authentic faith. That's a faith that fully grasped not only the gospel message but the mission God has for his people. His faith—what he believed—guided his actions—what he did. Now, I'm not saying that having faith means we need to be full time church workers, but you get the point. True, authentic faith has to be more than just what I believe. What I believe should govern what my actions are.

People want to know this about churches too. Does this gathering of believers have an authentic faith? Do they as a church family really believe what they confess? Do their lives and actions give testimony to the faith they confess is in their hearts. It's easy to be safe and secure as members of a church, to know Jesus is our Savior and admit that he wants us to be out sharing this with all people. It's much harder for us to actually do that. Yet this is what being a disciple of Jesus is all about. God has called us to be more than members of a church. He's called us to be disciples of Jesus. Being a disciple is more than simply following Jesus, it's imitating him. It's heeding his word and seeking to carry out the mission which he has given us of being his

witnesses to the world. Are we living as Jesus' disciples where our confession of faith really guides our lives and the way that we live? Do we really get it?

The focus of Epiphany is to reveal the true glory of God in Jesus. Our lessons throughout this season will highlight the appearance of Jesus as the Son of God and the Savior of the world and the mission he has given to us as his people. We always begin this season with the Father anointing Jesus for his work at his Baptism. How strengthening to hear God proclaim in our Gospel lesson: "*This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased.*" God again confirms with his voice and shines the spotlight directly on Jesus so that we can know with absolutely no doubt: "This is the one I sent to be your Savior." We see Jesus willingly stepping forward to carry out the mission on which the Father had sent him, putting himself fully into the place of sinful humans to walk the road that we deserved to walk. With his Baptism, we see the Father pouring out the Holy Spirit on Jesus, giving him the strength his human nature would need to fight against the devil and carry out the mission on which he had been sent to secure our salvation.

We know this. We praise God that he has led us to see in Jesus our Savior from sin. We praise God that he has revealed Jesus as the promised Messiah who fully rescued us from the devil and brought us into his family. We understand what Jesus has done for us. We appreciate it and treasure it. But do we fully get the mission that Jesus has now given to us as his people? Do we understand that God not only accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right but that he sends each and every one of us into to the world to proclaim this message so that people from every nation can know and believe it? Do we grasp it so much that we are dying for people from every nation to know God, fear him and follow in his footsteps?

Here's why I think these are important questions to ask: If we do truly grasp who God is, what he has done for us and what he wants for us as his people, then why aren't we overflowing every week in worship with God's people longing for the opportunity to worship their Lord and Savior? Why aren't we overwhelmed with requests for Bible Studies to grow even more in our faith and life as God's people? Why do we have issues with our giving where God's people don't support the efforts to reach out? Why don't people just step forward to offer their service instead of making us beg people to serve? Why aren't we out there every day—working to bring back the veil from so many others so that they can know God's love and salvation for them in Jesus? Why aren't we beating down the doors of the unchurched and dechurched to share the joy and forgiveness that God has for us. We claim him to be Jesus who saves us. We proclaim him to be the Messiah promised of God. We confess him to be our Lord and the one who rules over our lives. We believe that God sent us out to bring his message to all nations. But do our actions show this? Do we really get it?

This is our mission. God has not simply called us to faith so that we work to maintain our faith. He has called us to faith not simply so we can grow in our faith. God has commissioned us to take our faith to the people of all nations. He has called us to go out and invite people to come and learn more about their Savior here at church. He has called us to go out and give a reason for the hope that we have when we are given the opportunity to do so. He has instructed us to be his witnesses to all people—not just to people we know and like, not just to people we would deem worthy to hear the message, not just to people we think would be more inclined to believe—but to all people from every nation. In fact, we don't even have to go to other nations to do this! God has brought all nations to our doorsteps right here in Tampa. Do we really get it?

I know this can be hard and scary work. I know it's easy to feel unprepared and unequipped to carry out this work. But God prepared you for your mission the same way he prepared Jesus for his—through the waters of Holy Baptism. At Jesus' baptism, the Father said, "*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.*" God said the very same thing at your baptism: "This is my child and because you have been cleansed of your sin by Jesus, I am well pleased with you." When Satan or wicked men would challenge Jesus by saying, "If you are God's son...", Jesus could look back at his baptism and say, "I am God's Son. He said so at my baptism." What a comfort for you when you are challenged by Satan or wicked people to doubt God's care for you as you carry out this mission, you can have the same comfort: "I am God's child. He said so at my baptism." At the baptism of Jesus, he received the strength his human nature needed to live a holy life and carry out the mission God gave to him. At your baptism, Jesus covered you with the robe of his righteousness and filled you with the strength to live your life for him. At Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit was given to him to help him resist temptation, answer the prayers of the sick and preach the good news. At your baptism, you were born into God's kingdom by water and the spirit, were renewed by the Holy Spirit to resist temptations and given the strength to share the good news with your neighbors in the words the Spirit will give you. Baptism not only took away our sins, it also gives us the power to live as God's people and carry out his mission.

God has given you all that you need to carry out his mission. Will it be uncomfortable? At times, yes. Peter was criticized for entering into the house of a Gentile. Yet God worked through Peter's discomfort to bring about some wonderful blessings for Cornelius and his family. We'll face our share of uncomfortable situations too. We might see people in church who look and act a bit differently than perhaps what we are used to. We might find people with kids who make more noise during worship than what we like. People may not dress as nicely as we are used to for worship. We may have to look at different schedules to accommodate the most amount of people. There might be someone sitting in your seat when you get to worship on Sunday who just didn't know. There will be people who are at much different levels in their sanctified living. We may have to set aside some of our own personal preferences for the good of the whole. But that's what love does! Love is willing to do whatever it takes, even putting ourselves in uncomfortable situations so that we can share with others the precious message of our Savior.

I'm finally getting it. That's what Peter admitted to Cornelius. I pray that we get it too. This message of peace is not just for us, but for all people. I pray that we get it enough to put ourselves aside for this wonderful mission. We pray for God's blessings as we carry out our blessed privilege and calling—to proclaim Christ to the world, to show our faith is authentic, and to give testimony that we really do get it. Amen.