

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 9, 2021

Psalm 98:1–9 (ESV):

1 Oh sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done marvelous things!
His right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him.

2 The LORD has made known his salvation;
he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.

3 He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness
to the house of Israel.

All the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.

4 Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises!

5 Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody!

6 With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD!

7 Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who dwell in it!

8 Let the rivers clap their hands;
let the hills sing for joy together

9 before the LORD, for he comes
to judge the earth.

He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.

First Reading: Acts 10:34–48 (ESV):

Gentiles Hear the Good News

34 So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. 36 As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), 37 you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39 And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, 40 but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, 41 not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42 And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. 43 To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

The Holy Spirit Falls on the Gentiles

44 While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. 45 And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. 46 For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, 47 “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” 48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

EPISTLE: 1 John 5:1–8 (ESV):

Overcoming the World

5 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. 2 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. 3 For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. 4 For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory

that has overcome the world—our faith. 5 Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

Testimony Concerning the Son of God

6 This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. 7 For there are three that testify: 8 the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree.

THE GOSPEL - John 15:9–17 (ESV):

9 As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11 These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. 17 These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

Sermon 19 – Sixth Sunday of Easter

"The Great Divide"

Acts 10:34-48

Dear friends in Christ,

In our reading from Acts Peter comes to a conclusion that seems completely obvious to us, but was an enormous leap of faith for the Christians in the early church. Understanding what's going on here necessitates going back a bit to see what God is doing and how he is opening the eyes of the early church. In the verses before this, Peter is

praying on the roof of a house when he starts to get hungry. As he prays, God sends Peter a vision, lowering a blanket picnic-style filled with all sorts animals, reptiles, birds of the air, crawling things, and so forth. God shows Peter this buffet of meat and says, Okay Peter, you hungry? Kill and eat. Peter objects. Why? Because under Jewish law, the same law that God had given the nation those hundreds of years ago in the Book of Exodus, these foods were unclean. If you were a Jew, you did not eat certain types of animals, God had commanded you not to eat certain types of animals. That's what is on the blanket that God shows a hungry Peter. It is filled with unclean meat that God is telling him, go ahead, eat. Peter says, I'm not supposed to eat that stuff! I've never eaten that stuff, God, because you told me not to!

God responds to this: **“What God has made clean, do not call common.”** With one short sentence, and a relatively simple vision, God has drastically changed the way Peter and rest of the early Christians think about themselves, their neighbors, and what Jesus has done. How so? Well, imagine you are a first century Jew. From the cradle, you have been programmed to think in these categories of clean and unclean. This is a worldview, a way of looking at everything in your life, everything. It's how you look at food, the dishes, even people are either clean or unclean. Every person you meet, you're automatically making that judgment in your head, its instinctive. Okay, what kinda clothes does he wear? What's his accent like? Whenever a Jew met a non-Jew, the Jew was always thinking “is he clean?” That is, is he one of us?

It's hard for us to think in those terms. We have been, largely, raised to think of people as people, regardless of any other considerations, and that's good. But the Jews thought in these categories, clean and unclean, and now God says to them, none of that matters anymore. That's a shock to the system for poor Peter, and for all the Jews who had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

Now why does God do this? God does this to teach and show pointedly what Jesus did in His life. Those rules do not apply to us anymore because Jesus did them for us,

that's one of the gifts that we take for granted. We don't have jump through a million different hoops to call ourselves God's people. We believe that Jesus did all that for us, and that makes us God's people, not following rules. These ideas of clean and unclean are done away with, why? Because Jesus went to the cross to make all of us clean. To free us all from our sins. In Jesus we're all the same, because we have the same sin, we have the same savior.

This was very very hard for the first Christians to understand, as you can see from these portions of Acts. It was a challenge to everything they thought God expected of them. But God is doing this to show them not just that they don't have to worry about the food they eat, but that He wants all men to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth, not just Jews and those that follow Jewish laws. Peter experiences this vision and he thinks its about food, food isn't the point here, the point comes from Peter himself.

Peter receives a pair of messengers from Cornelius, a Gentile with a position of authority in the Roman army. This man invites Peter to his home. Peter goes. He enters the house and says this: **“You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection.”** Peter gets it. Jesus has torn down these barriers between Jew and Gentile both by fulfilling the Old Covenant perfectly, and by dying for the sins of all mankind. Suddenly, Jew or Gentile, it doesn't matter anymore. The new Jewish Christians will continue to wrestle with this question for quite some time. This first reading fits into that awkward phase of the Christian faith, as they try to figure out what is Christian, what is Jew, and what is both. God gives His guidance, and helps things along, as you can see in the later part of the reading. The Holy Spirit falls on the Gentiles too, they do miracles too, they are baptized too. Jew and Gentile no longer means a darn thing, because Jesus has levelled the playing field.

Okay fine, I hope that helps you understand the thinking at play here. Great. Lovely. Now what? We are not confused Jewish Christians, we are confused American Christians, and Gentiles all. Remember, this isn't about food and it isn't about rules, it is about the barriers and divides between us and our fellow human beings, and between us and our God. Those things are just as true for us as they were for Jews, Gentiles and whoever. Barriers are a result of broken relationships, misunderstandings, offense... if I had to sum it up in a single word: Sin. Sin breaks us down as human beings, in how we interact with each other, and in how we interact with our God.

One of the most precious gifts that Jesus gives us is a restored relationship with God. Without Jesus, our relationship with God is broken beyond repair, there's a huge gulf between us and God, you can't cross it. Sin and holiness do not mix at all. God is holy, we're sinful, we need someone to bridge the gap between us, which Jesus has done. We can approach God in prayer confident He hears only because Jesus has taken away our sins. We can face death with confidence that something lies beyond it only because Jesus has taken away death's sting, and brought good out of that tragedy. We can face life and all its myriad of challenges because we know that Jesus had made a place for us in God's plan. We have a Savior looking out for us because that Savior died to remove that barrier between God and man. That's the good news of this reading from Acts. The fact that God accepts any human being at all is a miracle only made possible by the blood that Jesus shed on the cross.

But, as Peter and those early Christians had to learn, this isn't just about our relationship with our God. It is about our relationship with our fellow humans. The Jews were thinking in terms of clean and unclean as they had been trained. We don't think in these terms, but that doesn't mean our relationships with each other can't get awfully messed up at times. Those barriers are still there. As much as we have in common, we humans, we have our differences as well. Our sin turns those differences into conflict, breaks those relationships down. Sure, we have to grit our teeth and smile each other as

our society expects, but in the heart the relationship is wrecked seemingly beyond repair. Here, Peter tells us of the hope that Jesus offers us, not just for healing for our relationship with God, but with other people as well.

Amen.