

"TRULY THE WORSHIP OF GOD"

Acts 10:34-48

This week Americans celebrate July Fourth and Independence Day. The holiday brings up feelings of pride in this nation, feelings of thankfulness for the freedom that is unique to America, and thankful feelings for the many people who formed this unusual system of government, and the people who have fought and died to keep us free. There will be fireworks, and parades, and flag waving.

If we examine our country's history, its clear that there has never been a time when everything was perfect. There have always been problems, and poverty. Every generation has had strife and struggles. Today and in recent years, our country has a growing sense of division. The state of our union is fractured, tribal.

Years ago, commentator Leonard Sweet described this as "tribalism." He wrote, ***"The problem with this new tribalism is that people start seeing enemies. We need to teach people that you don't start killing other tribes."***

Public life today is divided. Some people won't talk to their opponents, won't even listen to them. "I'm right. You're wrong. You're the one who needs to change." That's not a prescription for the common good.

You've seen this in your life, too. In our social media world, we associate with people who think like us, who accept our views, and reinforce our opinions. Tweets and Facebook posts do not lead to conversations. It's like we are in echo chambers of our own making. All we hear are our own voices, and the voices of others who agree with our opinions. And sad to say, you can find this in churches, too.

Can you and I change it? I doubt that. But I am confident that people of faith can begin to model getting to know and appreciate people who are different than we are. As followers of Jesus, our desire and our prayer is that God the Holy Spirit would move every human heart, so that barriers which divide us may crumble,

suspicious disappear, and hatreds cease. Our prayer is that as we love others, this division would be healed, so that we may live in justice and peace.

Let's look at the story of a Christian who had a difficult time associating with someone who was different. It was more than difficult. At first, Peter resisted. Yes, this is about the great St. Peter, a Jewish follower of Jesus who resisted going to the house of a non-Jewish man named Cornelius. You can find the story in Acts 10

Let me give you a bit of background. Peter, was a Jewish man, a fisherman, who became a close disciple of Jesus. God worked on Peter to change his attitude from being a man who completely stayed away from people who were not Jewish like him, to become a man who went into the home of a gentile. He did what he had believed was forbidden, went into the house of a Roman Centurion named Cornelius. And here's the first thing Peter said there: **"So Peter opened his mouth and said, 'Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him.'"** Acts 10:34

"Truly I understand," Peter said. How did he come to understand that God shows no partiality? No partiality to Jews or Gentiles, no partiality to Americans or Westerners? How did Peter come to understand that God shows no partiality to Anglos, shows no partiality to Hispanics or to Asians or to Africans or to African-Americans? How did Peter come to understand that God shows no partiality to Peter himself or to me or to you? How did Peter get out of his tribal mentality? **"Truly I understand,"** he said. He literally means, "Now I grasp it." Now I grasp **"that God shows no partiality, but in every nation (every people group) anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him."**

How did God lead Peter to this complete change of attitude? The answer is that Peter got out of his personal comfort zone, got out of his comfortable synagogue cocoon, and got to know someone who was different. That wasn't easy for Peter. But Peter followed Jesus.

Last Sunday we told the story of how Jesus went into the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon. There was a woman there who begged Jesus to cast out of her little daughter an evil spirit.

The Bible reports that Jesus said to her, **"Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.' But she answered Him, 'Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' And He said to her, 'For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.' And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone"** Mark 7:25-30.

There are other stories like that, Jesus bringing His mission to all people. In Mark 13:10, Jesus said that the Gospel would be proclaimed to all nations, not just to Israel. For whatever reason, Peter didn't get it into his head that Jesus' forgiveness and hope is for *ALL* people, not until ... Acts 10.

At the start of chapter 10, Peter had a strange dream. It was noon, he was praying on the housetop, and he was hungry.

"... he fell into a trance and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.' And the voice came to him again a second time, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven" (Acts 10:10-16).

Now that's a strange dream, and it puzzled Peter, too. "I should eat food that is unclean? My whole life long I have only eaten ritually clean food. This is my faith!" And what happened next? Knock! Knock! Three men show up at the door and say,

"Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say." (Acts 10:22).

This must have been difficult for Peter. "I should go into the home of a Gentile? He might be a good person among his kind of people, but I'm not one of them."

This is where the Great Commission gets personal for Peter. Jesus had said, **"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have spoken to you."**

Matthew 28:19-20 Peter still hadn't gone to other people from the other tribes until this dream and the follow-up invitation.

Peter obeys, gets out of his personal comfort zone, gets out of his church cocoon. He ventured out and got to know people who were different and didn't know about Jesus. That changed Peter and also gave Peter an opportunity to tell Gentiles about Jesus.

For us too, as we get out of our personal comfort zones, our comfy church cocoons, and get to know people different than we are, we put ourselves in positions to grow in faith and grow our witness to Jesus.

Let me make a point clearly. I am not talking about us getting to know other people from our own tribe. You are church-goers, and I'm not talking about getting to know someone in your congregation whom you don't know. Nothing wrong with that. In fact, it's good to do, but that's not what I'm talking about here.

I am talking about us who know the Lord Jesus getting to know people who don't know the salvation Jesus brings. That's what Peter did with Cornelius, a believer spent time with someone who didn't yet know Jesus.

Let me give a reason for this: a reason from the Bible. Where does the worship of God take place? Most church-goers would probably say in a church building, in the Sunday service, in those times where people come together, and the Spirit uses Word and Sacrament to grow our saving faith in Jesus.

That is true. God is at work there in the worship service. And yet, that is a very restricted, a very narrow understanding of worship.

We believe and follow the Ten Commandments God has given us, don't we? Yes, we do. The first 3 Commandments are about

loving God. The 1st Commandment, **“You shall have no other Gods before Me;”** the 2nd Commandment, **“You shall not misuse God’s name;”** and the 3rd Commandment, **“Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy;”** – all three are about our love for God. We are not to follow other gods, not to fall away from the truth of God’s Word but hold onto His truth tenaciously, and we are to eagerly grow in worshipping God and reading His Word, His letter to us. Jesus said these three Commandments can be summed up in this way, **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”** Matthew 22:37

Does that sound very open to believing in other ideas that contradict God’s truth? No. Not at all. We must always hold to God’s truth because God’s Word contains Jesus, our Savior. The way to forgiveness, peace, and heaven are found *only* in God’s way, in God’s Word.

Now, that being said, let’s also not forget the other seven of the Ten Commandments. Commandments four through ten talk about the way we treat other people. These are God’s teaching about how we are to love others. Remember, Jesus said, **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.... And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”** Matthew 22:37, 39

This is important, so listen here: These Commandments four through ten aren't talking only about fellow church members, our own religious tribe. They are about people. Period. From our tribe and other tribes. If we think that worship is only confined to the times when like-minded believers get together, we have too restricted an understanding of worship.

A scholar named Phillip Melanchthon was Martin Luther's right-hand-man during the Reformation. Melanchthon wrote, ***“We should learn that the works of the Second Table [meaning Commandments 4-10] are truly the worship of God, that is, when our works are guided by the fear of God and by faith.”***

He is saying that when we love God, then we also love the people God loves – people around us. Think about these Commandments:

- God said, "**You shall not kill.**" That means help people with bodily needs of physical life. Showing love when we feed and cloth and care for others.
- When we followers of Jesus care for the family life or broken family lives of others, that's the positive side of the Commandment about marriage, "**You shall not commit adultery**"
- "**You shall not steal,**" means that we care for the economic needs of others.
- When we give attention to the reputations of other people, that's the positive side of the Commandment that says, "**You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor**"

Why do these things? Because as people who love our God and Savior above all things, then we worship Him by loving others. Worship is not just an hour a week, but worship is your whole life, 24/7/52. Love God. Love others. This is truly worshipping God.

Does this somehow tilt us toward what was called a "social gospel"? Some churches teach a message that so watered down it comes out, "Be Kind." They mean, be innocuous. Be tolerant of all beliefs, no matter what.

"Be Kind" is not the gospel. That's not God's whole truth for us in His Word, the Bible. We must never lose or treat as unimportant that Jesus is the one and only Savior from sin. That we turn away from sin and turn to Jesus for forgiveness, free and full.

When you love others as you love yourself, when you keep Commandments 4 through 10 – what we call "the Second Table of the Law" – you get an incentive to love God more, that is, to keep Commandments 1 through 3 – what we call "the First Table of the Law." It works like this: We live in a divided, tribal country. And when you love people who are not in your group, even people you disagree with, you are not giving up your faith in Jesus or giving up

God's morality for wrong woke beliefs, some of which are immoral. Instead, loving people so that you care for their bodily needs of food and clothes, helping with family trauma, assisting people economically, and protecting their reputation from anyone who would cancel them, what you will see first-hand is the mess of sin. We will see the devastation of sin in our world. We will see the hurt, the hopelessness, and the despair that comes when people live without faith in the grace of God freely given in Jesus. We will face the hard truth that society's programs, laws, and statements do not solve the ravages of sin. Only Jesus can!

When you and I love people who don't know Jesus and meet them in their needs, we will be driven more and more to God, to call upon Him, and be more dependent upon Him, to discover a deeper *need* for His Word, and worship, and Holy Communion.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote,

"It is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. ... I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world.... That, I think, is faith; that is metanoia (repentance); and that is how one comes a man and a Christian. ~ Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Friends when you get involved with people in the world it will drive you even more to the gifts God gives through Word and Sacrament.

It wasn't easy for Peter. It took some doing on God's part to have Pete go into the home of the Gentile Cornelius. But he went because Peter finally understood the truth that God wants **"all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth"** (1 Timothy 2:4).

Here's what Peter said.

"Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him. As for the word that He sent to Israel,

preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the Baptism that John proclaimed: 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. And we are witness 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, but God raised Him on the third day and made Him to appear, 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. 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. To Him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His Name" (Acts 10:34-43).

"Everyone who believes in Him (Jesus) receives forgiveness of sins through His Name." The world is dangerously divided, the state of America's union is fractured, and too many people would rather condemn than converse. We've gone "tribal," as Leonard Sweet described it. You and I can't change the world, but we will grow in our faith in Jesus and His forgiveness as we get out of our personal comfort zones and our comfy cocoons and go to others. And as Peter wrote later in 1 Peter 3:15-16: **"Always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect."** Amen.