

January 8, 2014 - EKKLESIA Message
"Living - Accepted" – Pastor David Lee

Acts 10:34-43

³⁴ *Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly 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 *You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.*

³⁷ *That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced:*

³⁸ *how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.*

³⁹ *We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree;*

⁴⁰ *but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear,*

⁴¹ *not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.*

⁴² *He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.*

⁴³ *All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'*

"Love the Sinner/Hate the Sin." We've heard that for years as the evangelical response to accusations that Christians are judgmental and exclusive. In his Huffington Post article, "Why I Can't Say 'Love the Sinner/Hate the Sin' Anymore," Micah J. Murray makes the point, "I'm done. I can't look my gay brother in the eye anymore and say 'I love the sinner but hate the sin.' I can't keep drawing circles in the sand. I thought I just needed to try harder. Maybe I needed to focus more on loving the sinner, and less on protesting the sin. But even if I was able to fully live up to that "ideal," I'd still be wrong. I'd still be viewing him as something other, something different.

Not human. Not friend. Not Christian. Not brother."

Murray continues, "They say Jesus was a friend of sinners, but he didn't describe himself that way.

His motto wasn't 'eating and drinking with prostitutes and tax collectors.' Those were the labels used by the religious community, by the disapproving onlookers. What's amazing about Jesus is that when he hung out with sinners, he didn't act like they were sinners. They weren't a 'project,' a 'mission field.' They were his friends. People with names. Defined as beloved children of the Creator, not defined by their sins. Icons of God's image. His brothers and sisters. It was the Pharisees who looked at them and scrawled 'sinner' on their foreheads. It was the accusers who drew circles in the sand with themselves on the inside and 'those sinners' on the outside.

Those words -- 'a friend of sinners' -- were spoken with an upturned nose and a self-righteous sneer. And that's the same phrase the church has adopted to speak of our own brothers and sisters -- 'Love the sinner, hate the sin.'"

I have to confess, I am guilty as charged. I too have used the excuse, "Love the Sinner/Hate the Sin" to distance myself from my brothers - one an alcoholic, a drunk, and a serial adulterer; the other a recent convert to the philosophy, "I just want to be happy," his excuse for walking out on his wife of 40 years and taking up with a 33 year old woman. But am I any better than either one? My Bible says, "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away," (Isaiah 64:6) and "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," (Romans 3:23). That's ALL OF US. I am not excluded. Neither are you.

That's why Micah Murray concludes his article with, "So I'm done. I'm done with 'Love the sinner, but hate the sin.' I won't say it anymore. I'm done with speaking as if I'm different, better than you.

We are icons (windows of the Divine in Orthodox tradition). We are children of the Creator, redeemed by Jesus. We are brothers and sisters."

Our passage for this evening opens with the radical statement, "God shows no partiality," (Acts 10:34.) But haven't we always heard that Jewish people were God's "chosen people?" And don't we think that we, Christians, have somehow superseded those original "chosen people?" What does the Bible have to say that might substantiate Peter's claim, "God shows no partiality?"

The Old Testament, the only Bible that the Apostle Peter had when he spoke these words in the house of Cornelius, offers at least three witnesses that agree with what Peter said.

- **Deuteronomy 1:17** Do not show partiality in judging; hear both small and great alike. Do not be afraid of anyone, for judgment belongs to God.
- **Deuteronomy 10:17** For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.
- **2 Chronicles 19:7** Now let the fear of the LORD be on you. Judge carefully, for with the LORD our God there is no injustice or partiality or bribery.

And in Acts 15, at the very first Church Council (assembled because of the argument between Paul and Jewish Christians demanding that Gentile converts keep the whole Jewish Law), Peter addressed the rest of the Apostles, saying, ⁷"Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹ He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

And then there is the passage in Mark's Gospel (and Matthew's, too) where Jesus is asked about people "casting out demons in your name and they are not part of us." Jesus' answer is unequivocal, "for whoever is not against us is for us," (Mark 9:40).

So what do we do with this news - that God, unlike a lot of evangelical and even catholic theologians, is not in the business of drawing lines, choosing up sides, and crying foul when our actions bring into question, "Whose team are we on?" Jesus, again, provided ample instruction for us if we are truly ready to stop judging, choosing sides, and pointing out other's failures/problems.

- ¹"Do not judge, or you too will be judged.² For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. ³ Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" (Matthew 7)
- ³⁷"Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.³⁸ Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." (Luke 6)

The next thorny issue that tonight's text presents is contained in the statement, "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," (Acts 10:38). Biblical historians call the years between Jesus at 12 and Jesus at 30 (when he was baptized and began his ministry), the "hidden years." It is interesting that in Judaism, the age of 12 is the age when a young person "comes of age," and makes his or her "mitzvah," becomes a part of the covenant with God. And the age of 30 is considered the age of readiness for the priesthood (back when there were priests, or Kohen, in the Temple). There is simply no Biblical witness for what Jesus did from the time he was found in the Temple asking questions of the elders, when he went home and was obedient to his parents and grew in favor with God and people, and the day he stepped into the Jordan River to be baptized by John.

There is an ancient legend, dating at least from the 12th century, which says Jesus accompanied his uncle Joseph of Arimathea (a purported tin merchant) to Britain (a Roman province and source of Roman tin). The Glastonbury Abbey, one of England's most ancient, was believed to have been founded at the place that Joseph later returned to (after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70) with an icon of the Blessed Virgin. The beloved English hymn "Jerusalem" (words by William Blake and music by Hubert Parry) recounts this legend in the verse,

"And did those feet in ancient time.
Walk upon England's mountains green:
And was the holy Lamb of God,
On England's pleasant pastures seen!"

But this is legend, not Holy Scripture.

What is Holy Scripture is that when Jesus was baptized, "the heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form, like a dove, and anointed him. And a voice (from heaven) was heard to say, 'This is my Son whom I love. I am well pleased with him,'" (Matthew 3:16-17)

We don't know what Jesus knew before he was anointed by the Holy Spirit at his Baptism (He did say that thing about needing to be in his father's house - Luke 2:49), but we do know that from that moment forward God the Father was with His one and only Son in power, demonstrating His glory, and through Jesus, His plan.

Finally, Peter talks about how the Apostles had been commanded to preach to the people and to testify. Initially, that was taken to mean only to Jewish people. Peter (somewhat) and Paul expanded the ministry of preaching and testifying to include Gentile (mostly Greek) believers, and most of the Book of Acts is about that dramatic expansion of the mission. Other Apostles, notably Thomas, who legend has going to India, also seemed to take seriously Jesus' commandment to "go and make disciples of all people . . . teaching them to observe all that I have taught," (Matthew 28:19-20). Jesus' command was really specific about how far we should go, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth," (Acts 1:8), but the human temptation is always to limit my outreach to those most like me.

It was merchants, historians tell us, who took the Christian faith to the far reaches of the Roman Empire. It took 250 years before anyone cared to preach to the country folk (Martin of Tours), the pagani (Pagan equals "country bumpkin). In the 13th century, preaching and evangelizing had become so scarce that God had to raise up a brand new saint, Francis of Assisi, to remind folks that our primary mission was to "make disciples for Jesus Christ." Francis believed that all activities of a believer were potentially a witness for Christ. He famously said, "Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words."

It was, again, a dearth of missionary testifying and preaching that gave rise to the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), led by Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier in the 16th century. Two hundred years later, John Wesley and the Methodists re-ignited missionary fervor and sent it to the new United States. Francis Asbury carried the Good News of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the fledgling nation, with 2 million Methodists counted in the North and South by the time of the Civil War.

Like most mainline churches in the U. S. in the 20th and 21st centuries, Methodist evangelical fervor has cooled dramatically, and with it our faithfulness to God's mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ to change this lost and hurting world. How are we to fulfill Christ's command, and Peter's exhortation?,

One of the best pieces of "good news" to come along is the current Roman Catholic Pope, Francis. He has brought an amazing new spirit of Christ to religious discussion world-wide. Pope Francis has demonstrated, by his simplicity and humility, the Spirit of Christ. He has spoken with

the welcome of Christ, and demonstrated it with persons suffering deformity, with children, even with a Muslim woman prisoner (whose feet he washed on Holy Thursday in a Roman prison). So is it any wonder that he has attracted the attention of the "blogosphere?"

Zack Hunt, of "www.twitter.com/TheAmericanJesus," wrote on November 22, 2013 in the Huffington Post, "I'm Protestant, but I'm a fan of Pope Francis. A big fan. I'm under no illusions that he isn't without his flaws, but when it comes to the Christian faith and in particular being Christ-like he just seems to get it, probably more than any other major Christian leader I know."

" Again, I'm not Roman Catholic, but he's the sort of leader I would gladly follow, the kind of Christ-like example I want to follow. But incarnated grace aside, the thing that's really shocked me the most about Pope Francis is the response he's received from those outside the faith. And I don't just mean non-Catholics. I mean those of entirely different religious traditions, but especially those with no religious affiliation at all and those who oppose religion altogether."

Hunt goes on to list up examples of even non-Christian positivity around this witness for Christ.

- I'm not Catholic, but man do I love this Pope! (Buzzfeed)
- Agreed. I'm a Recovered Catholic, born-again pagan- but this is one cool dude! (Buzzfeed)
- I'm an atheist, but I am really starting to like Pope Francis. He really seems like he understands that the church should be focusing on doing what Jesus said- helping the poor, needy and undesirables. If more Christians would actually live their life like this- Christianity wouldn't get such a bad reputation. I truly hope Pope Francis continues on this path. I know he will do great things in his time for the church. (Huffington Post)
- Though I am not Catholic or even religious, my respect for Pope Francis continues to grow. He strikes me as a true man of Christ. (Yahoo)
- Makes me want to rethink my atheism. What a kind, good hearted, loving human this pope is. (Yahoo)
- This Pope is crushing it. I'm an atheist from a very religious family, but I'm so pleased about some of Pope Francis' actions and stances. He gets it, and the church needs it. (CNN)
- I have long held a grudge against the Catholic Church (and the Christian faith) for the hypocrisy and intolerance so often exhibited by its practitioners. In no time in my life have I liked a Pope or felt that they embodied what Christians and Catholics proclaim is the essence of their faith. That is, until Pope Francis. I'm thrilled to finally see a religious leader so full of love and compassion. Though I am not Catholic, I truly believe that Pope Francis is a wonderful human being and actually deserves the respect he is given. (Washington Post)
- I am certainly no fan of the RCC and there is a lot of work they need to do in order to clean up their act, but this pope? Is a class act. Shine on, Your Eminence, shine on. (Huffington Post)

Hunt concludes with this statement, a statement that inspires me, and I hope inspires you, to a whole new hope in our witness and mission for Jesus Christ in this New Year.

"Which means in his simple humility and compassionate servitude, Pope Francis is succeeding where our best programming and marketing efforts have failed - he's reaching those who don't want to be reached.

So pastors, if you're out there and you're listening and you really care about reaching the people in your own community, stop listening to the ministry gurus tell you how to grow your church. Stop funneling money into the latest fad program. Stop being a slave to the latest worship trend. Stop trying to be like the celebrity megachurch pastor you follow online and start trying to be more like Pope Francis.

If nothing else, it's cheaper and the results speak for themselves.

But more importantly, it's a much more Christ-like way of leading and living than most of us have seen in a very, very long time. The kind of example the Church needs now maybe more than ever. The kind of example all of us need to embody whether we're the pope or a pastor or just somebody sitting in the pews.

As Pope Francis seems to be reminding us each and every day, if Christianity is going to have any credibility it has to be lived out, not just talked about.

He's doing a lot to restore some of that credibility.

I can't wait to see what he does next."

I can't wait to see what God is going to do through Francis, and through all of us here at Christ Church. How about you?