

## "No Division in Christ" Acts 10:34-48

May 10, 2015

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

It's very sad, but it seems that there is so much division among people these days.

Sometimes this division is because of differences in nationality. People from different countries don't get along with each other. Sometimes this division is because of race. We've seen violence and rioting in places like Ferguson, MO and Baltimore for racial reasons. Sometimes this division is because of differences in religion. We see groups like Isis and Boko Haram terrorizing and killing people for religious reasons.

Any of these divisions can be quite serious and cause great problems. Finding a solution for any one of these divisions might seem hopeless. But imagine if you combined all three of those divisions – nationality, race, and religion – into one situation. That would seem to be impossible to solve. Yet that is exactly the situation which is described in our text from Acts today.

The whole story begins at the beginning of chapter ten where Peter is invited to the home of a man named Cornelius, a centurion in the Roman army. The text describes him as “a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continuously to God.”

Yet Peter doesn't want to go. Cornelius is of a different nationality – Italian, not Israeli. He is of a different race – Gentile, not Jewish. And, as far as Peter knows, he is of a different religion – a pagan and not a worshiper of the true God. Jews naturally hated the Romans because of their military and political occupation of Israel. Jews shunned Gentiles in an effort to remain ethnically pure. After all, the Jews were God's chosen people and the Gentiles were not worthy of any of His blessing, they thought. Jews would not associate with pagans. They could not eat with them, enter into their houses, or interact with them in any way because they worshiped a false god.

All of that might seem a bit extreme to us in this day and age. If such behavior does exist, we might point our fingers at Isis or rioters in Ferguson or Baltimore as being guilty of it. But do we ever get defensive in our behavior towards those from whom we are divided? Do we avoid people who are not “like us”? We might think of some people only in terms of “us” vs. “them”. We might see other people only in terms of how they must change in order to get along with us. In terms of our religious division, we begin to think, like Peter, how much more deserving we are of our standing before God and His blessings than those non-Christians or those godless pagans. We can easily become very prideful when it comes to comparing ourselves with others whom we think are nationally, racially, or religiously inferior to ourselves.

Yet the truth of the matter is that none of us has any reason to take pride in him/herself. None of us has any basis for feeling superior to anyone else in this world. For there is one important area in which you and I are completely equal to anyone of any nationality, to anyone rioting or looting on the streets of Ferguson or Baltimore, or to any Isis or any other Islamic terrorist and that is the area of sin.

“There is no difference for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” the Word of God says (Rom. 3:22-23). Each of us is equally guilty of sin as anyone from any other nation. Each of us is equally deserving death as any rioter or terrorist. Each of us is, by nature, as far away from God as any practioner of any pagan religion. We are all divided from each other and, more importantly, we are all divided from God.

How do we solve the problem of division? Some try civil or political solutions to create harmony through the use of slogans, rallies, and even riots and lootings and hope that is the answer. Some put their hope in military means to achieve unity. This is essentially the strategy of Isis and others: convert and join us or die. Some, frustrated by the ineffectiveness of any proposed solutions, do nothing and hope the problem goes away. Some of you may remember the riots in

Los Angeles in 1991 which were a response to the beating of Rodney King. His efforts to diffuse the situation were summed up in his now famous line of, "Can't we all just get along?"

The effort to heal division has to begin with the recognition that, since we are all sinners trapped under the divisive control of sin, the solution has to come from outside of ourselves. That's what the whole somber season of Lent was all about and what the joyous celebration of Easter is all about.

All of the proposals we come up with to heal division only deal with the symptoms of division. Jesus Christ came to deal with the cause of division: sin. There was no way to ignore the problem and hope it would go away. God is holy and His nature compels Him to deal with sin and eliminate it. There was no negotiating or compromising in some sort of deal that could be made between God and us. There was no human price that could be paid nor any human worthy to pay such a price.

Peter outlines the solution in sermon at Cornelius' house in our text. Peace with God came through Jesus Christ. God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power. He went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil. The Jewish leaders put him to death by hanging Him on a tree. But this was not defeat for Jesus, as it seemed, but victory for us. As we remember in Lent every year, this was precisely God's plan for Jesus to deal with sin and the division which it causes. Jesus death earned forgiveness for all sin, thus, making peace with God. The division between us and God has been healed.

But that's not all. As Peter said, "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." As we celebrate in this Easter season, we remember Jesus did not stay dead or merely rise spiritually or in the hearts and minds of people. Jesus defeated death and rose from the grave physically to give hope and assurance to all who will one day face death themselves. As we have seen in Peter's sermons in our readings from Acts during the Easter season, the preaching of the resurrection was key in the apostolic message. It was never

left out or downplayed. Jesus died to free us from our sins. Jesus rose from the grave to free us from death.

What's the solution to division? It's not very spectacular as Peter found out when he got to Cornelius's house. Simply tell the account of what God did through Jesus and why He did it. Jesus went around preaching about the arrival of the Kingdom of God where God would be at peace with all people and all people would be at peace with each other. After dying to make this happen and rising from the grave to confirm it, Jesus sent His apostles out to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins to every nation. Jesus still sends men out to preach that same message of peace with God and unity with one another through the forgiveness of sins.

He calls us to be witnesses for Him. Peter says they were witnesses of all Jesus did and that they ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead. That describes us as well. In His Word, we have seen and heard what Jesus has done. In His Supper, we have eaten and drank with Him. In fact, we have eaten and drank Him. We bear witness of who Jesus is, what He has done, how He died and then rose to life again, and the hope for the future that we have because of this.

We bear witness to anyone and everyone, regardless of nationality, race, or religion. Some people think that Christianity is an exclusionary religion and reject it because of that. I would say that the message, the blessings, the promises, and the hope which Jesus came to bring are "exclusively inclusive." There is no way to the Father except through Jesus. In that way, it is exclusive. But that way is open to everyone of every nationality, race, or religion. "Everyone", Peter says, "who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." In that way it is very inclusive.

Peter learned that when he walked into the house of Cornelius. Here was someone of a different nationality, different race, and, previously, a different religion. But Peter encounters faith in Cornelius and leads Peter to exclaim, "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears (as in "fears, loves, and trusts") him and does what is right is acceptable to

him.” Peter preached the Gospel to the assembly. The Holy Spirit was poured on these non-Jewish people. They praised God. And they were baptized.

As we preach or witness to Jesus Christ by speaking the Word of God to everyone, regardless of any division that might separate us, anyone who hears that Gospel and believes obtains the forgiveness for all their sins, receives the gift of the Holy Spirit, becomes at peace with God and is acceptable to Him.

That means they are acceptable to us, too. We have been accepted by God so that we might be accepting of all others whom He has also accepted. We are to love and accept brothers and sisters in Christ even if they are of a different age, a different culture, a different nationality, a different race, or formerly of a different religion or no religion at all. The major division between us is gone because the division between us and God is gone. Any minor divisions that still exist can be and will be worked on in Christian love with the goal of resolution and harmony.

As we come to the end of another joyful Easter season, remember that the joy and the hope that comes from Jesus rising from the grave to life is not something limited to this congregation, our denomination, our race, our country, or to anyone else. As Christ died for all, He also rose for all. And the gifts He offers are for all. Let us continue to preach and to witness to our Living Lord and Savior Jesus Christ that more might receive His gifts and be united to Him and with us until the day when all divisions cease and we live in perfect unity and harmony forever with Him. Amen.