

As we enter this last month and a half of Pastor Mike being our senior pastor, we are going to start looking at who we are as a church. Because who we are is not defined by the senior pastor or the associate pastor. Who we are is defined by God and his call on the ministry of this church. So we want to spend a few weeks looking at who we are as First Presbyterian church, past, present, and future. So today we begin in the book of Acts. This is a great sermon by Peter. And before I share Peter’s sermon with you, I want to put this into context. This teaching by Peter takes place in the account of Cornelius the centurion. Peter was summoned to the home of Cornelius who is a gentile, not a Jew. And through this and the dreams and visions that God had given Peter right before this, Peter is learning that this gift of the good news of Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit is going to be for gentiles as well as Jews. So, despite it being against Jewish custom and law, Peter goes to the home of Cornelius and Cornelius has gathered all of his friends and family. And Peter goes to teach them about Jesus. And here is what he says to them:

Acts 10:34-43

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. ³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷ You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— ³⁸ how 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. ³⁹ “We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹ He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us 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 whom God appointed 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.”

This is God’s Word for us today. So, Peter goes to the home of Cornelius and this gathering of Gentiles at God’s bidding and what is the first thing he says? “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.” He admits that he has learned something new and now operates differently because of it. God has taught him something new, that everyone is offered the grace of God and the Holy Spirit. This is not just for Jewish followers of Christ. God shows Peter something new. And this is not just a little something new. God has completely changed how Peter sees the kingdom of God and eternity. God has expanded the saving of his people from Israel to everyone. And this is something that this church does represent. We have people from every walk of life, every level of education, multiple ethnicities and cultures, all ages, etc. This is something that First Presbyterian church has been blessed with. We reflect what Peter says here in verse 34 “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.”

However, as much as we have gotten that part of this sermon by Peter right, I wonder if we are willing to learn new things from God? Peter has to listen to what God tells him and shows him in the verses leading up to this passage. And he has to wrestle with it. Because God is stretching Peter to separate what is Jewish custom from what is true about God and salvation. Back in verses 9 through 15 Peter has a vision of unclean

animals and in the vision God tells him to take and eat them. And Peter has a repulsive reaction in verse 14 he says “Surely not, Lord!...I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” Jewish dietary laws were serious to Peter. He would never break those rules. And God responds to him “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” God is taking Peter out of his comfort zone. God is separating Jewish custom, which for all of Peter’s life had been part of being obedient to God and part of being right with God, and God is saying that the relationship has changed. Jesus has changed everything. Your relationship with me now has nothing to do with what you eat. And the kingdom of God is going to be much bigger than you thought. Where do we as a church need to learn new things from God? What part of our life as a church is more custom than it is relationship with God? In what areas of our life as a church have old rules and old customs become more important to us than they are to God? What do we need to separate and what new things do we need to learn? I don’t have the answer to that question. I am going to be learning with you. But we do need to be open to what new things God is going to teach us. We need to be willing to move beyond that initial reaction that Peter had which was “no way God!” We have to be willing to be stretched as we go forward.

After this great realization Peter has, he goes on to teach this group of Gentiles about Jesus and the forgiveness of sins. And he first appeals to what they have already heard about, what they already know. He recalls what has happened. He says “You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷ You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— ³⁸ how 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... They killed him by hanging him on a cross, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.” Peter recounts what has happened. The basic facts. He covers that fact of who Jesus is in verse 36, that Jesus is Lord of all. He recounts what Jesus did and by whose power he did it...the power of God and the Holy Spirit in verse 38. And he reminds them of the most important part of all, that Jesus was killed on the cross and raised from the dead on the third day in verse 40. The basic facts. Notice Peter does not go back a recount all of the healings or the parables or the sermon on the mount or the transfiguration. None of those amazing moments in Jesus ministry are not in the summary. What are in the summary are the important facts, the facts which without the forgiveness of sins would not happen. He states who Jesus is from prophecy to fulfillment, whose power is at work, his death, and his resurrection. That’s it.

Brothers and sisters that is the message we need to keep sharing. We are surrounded by a culture that waters these facts down or even denies them. We even have fellow Christians who will want to spend more time arguing about the interpretation of a parable than talking about the forgiveness of sins. First Presbyterian church has a history of sticking to the facts of grace and salvation and I believe that continues to be a call on this church. There are so many wishy washy spiritual beliefs all around us. Many of you know for the past several years I have been working night time on call shifts at Ogden Regional hospital as a chaplain. I actually just recently stopped doing that because I will need to be round the clock on call for you once Pastor Mike retires. But would you believe that when someone checks into a hospital nowadays and is asked if they have a religious affiliation, there is now a check box for SBNR; “spiritual but not religious.” That is a real category now on hospital forms, right next to the other boxes such as LDS, Catholic, Baptist, etc. Spiritual but not religious. That may be a category but that is not what forgives sins. Believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is what forgives sins. Nothing else. So sticking to the important facts and proclaiming them as

Peter does here has been an important part of the history of First Pres and I think it should continue to be an important part of First Pres.

Peter gets to this in verse 42 where he says “He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed 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.” He commanded us to preach. And First Presbyterian church has preached and taught the Word of God for 148 years. 148 years...that hit me when I did the math the other day. Do you realize in 2021 we will have our 150th Anniversary as a church? There is a celebration I look forward to celebrating with you. When Sheldon Jackson traveled through Salt Lake City back in July of 1871, he reported back to the Presbyterian board of mission that a church needed to be organized and planted. It was later that year. They finally built a house of worship in 1874 and one year later they founded Westminster College in the basement of that building on 200 South and 200 East. Education was always so important. By 1890 there were 36 Presbyterian schools and academies educating over 50,000 children. Education is a big part of the history of First Presbyterian church. Why? Sheldon Jackson said it himself. He said “the training of the schools should be extended to the heart as well as the mind and hand.” Education in God’s Word is not just for our heads. It is meant to reach our hearts. It should draw us closer to God.

How are we doing on education today? At the child and youth level we are doing well. We have a wonderful children’s minister and a wonderful youth minister. However, we do not have enough teachers. Despite our adult attendance going down, we are steady at 30 plus children in Sunday school. They don’t always fit in the rooms. We need more teachers. We need to be able to break up the larger classes. First Presbyterian church, education of children has been important to you since 1875. Teaching people about Jesus has been essential. Are you willing to continue that? We need more teachers. I am also concerned about adult education. We have several good Bible studies led by faithful and talented people. But the attendance is low. Only a small percentage of you are participating. The average attendance for adult Sunday school at the 10 o’ clock hour is 12-15 people. That is .04% of the congregation. Less than 1% of this congregation goes to adult Sunday school. Remember back at the beginning of this passage by Peter when I noted the importance of being willing to learn new things. Well are you putting yourself in a position to learn new things? Have you really gotten to a point where there is nothing new to learn about God? I don’t think so. I think adult education needs to get back on the map if we are going to grow in Christ together.

One of the things that struck me about this mini sermon by Peter is that it has only one “I” statement which is right at the beginning where he says that he has recently learned something new...that grace and forgiveness are going to be offered to all nations and all people. But after that one “I” statement, the rest of the sermon uses “we” language. “We are witnesses,” “us who ate and drank with him,” “He commanded us to preach.” The sermon becomes collective. It is not about Peter and what Peter has done alone. It is all about us...the group of believers together. And I think that is for us as well. The life and ministry of this church is us, all of us together. It’s not what Pastor Mike does or what I do. This church is not about one person. This church has had at least 17 pastors. Yet, has the call and ministry of this church changed 17 or more times? No. Because it is WE, all of us who are the church. We are the ones called to preach this summary of truth that Peter gives us.

So we have this rich history of preaching the truth. Proclaiming the Word of God and the basics about Jesus Christ and the power of God and the forgiveness of sins. And as we come to a close I want to note two

things that come from the last two sentences of Peter's sermon. Peter says this starting in verse 42: "He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed 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." We are commanded to preach and proclaim two important things here. One, that he is the one. Jesus is the one. We are not still waiting for the Messiah. We are not waiting for God to reach out to us. God has. And the way to him is through the risen Lord Jesus Christ. So, one, he is the one. And two, as Peter says in verse 43, everyone who believes in him receives the forgiveness of sins. Everyone who believes in him. Not everyone who does enough good deeds or everyone who is rich enough or everyone who tries hard enough. Just everyone who believes that he is the one, receives the forgiveness of sins. Brothers and sisters in Christ, we have a rich history of proclaiming this truth in Salt Lake City. No matter what this transition looks like over the next months and year, we must keep proclaiming these two truths. We are commanded to do so. Keep telling our friends and neighbors and family members and community that he is the one. The one crucified and risen Lord. And that all of us, no matter who you are or where you are from or what you have done, all of us can receive the forgiveness for our sins by believing in him. My prayer is that we, all of us as a church, continue to preach that truth to those that need to hear it, no matter what transitions we face. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.