

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
January 8, 2017

Aha!

Valuing Those Different from Ourselves

Acts 10:34-38

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.

In the next 2 weeks, three dates will emphasize how different people are from us.

Next Monday is Martin Luther King Day. Most inner city schools have observed this holiday for years. Until this year, our school did not. Why? Because what Martin Luther King Jr. said fifty years ago is sadly still true. The most segregated time each week is the 11 am Sunday morning church hour.

Race separates people today. "They" are different from "us."

On Friday, January 20, President Elect Trump will be inaugurated. Some people will cheer. More than 50% of the voters in last fall's elections will mourn. No matter what side of the electoral divide you are one, "they" are different from "us."

Sunday, January 22, will be the 44th anniversary of Roe v. Wade, the Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion. Some will celebrate. Many will mourn.

Race separates us. Politics separate us. Religion separates us.

Yet, somehow, we all have to work together in our country. Somehow, we all have to value those who are different from us.

The first century Christian church dealt with these cultural divides too. For generations Jews had been taught to keep separate from Gentiles. The separation was so great that a woman at the well of Sychar was surprised that Jesus, a Jewish man, would even talk with her (John 4).

This cultural divide appeared insurmountable.

Yet, the church overcame these cultural divides. They learned to value people different from themselves. How did God turn on the light and get them to say, “Aha! I get it!” It wasn’t easy.

1. See them as God sees them.

In Acts 10, Luke the author records how God turned on the light for Peter.

The Apostle Peter is in Joppa, modern day Tel Aviv. It is about noon one day and he is hungry. He starts dreaming about food. Most of us can relate to that, especially if you are coming to the late service and you skipped breakfast.

But this dream was unusual. Rather than dreaming of all the foods that he has enjoyed his whole life, God gives him a vision of unclean animals. For me it would be like being hungry and dreaming about seeing eels swimming in a bucket in China. “No thanks! I’ll pass!”

But God says, “Peter, kill and eat.” Peter objects but God says, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” That happens three times!

Peter doesn’t get it immediately. But then God arranges one of those “coincidences” of life. At that very moment, three men from Caesarea come, from the household of a Roman soldier named Cornelius. Cornelius, this Gentile, had also seen a vision that told him to send for Peter.

The light was on for Peter, but still very dim. So Peter goes and listens to Cornelius’ story. And finally the light fully comes on. “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism³⁵ but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.”

This is the first step in valuing those different from us. We are to see “them” as God sees “us.”

If God were playing favorites, do you really think he would pick you? There are holier people than me. Choose a Mother Theresa. Choose a Martin Luther. Choose a Nelson Mandela. But chose me?

But that is exactly what God did. Ephesians 1 tells us that before the creation of the world, God chose you. Celebrate that for a moment. God does not show favoritism! Let’s read this together, each of us putting in our own first name in the blanks.

For [God] chose _____ in [Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love⁵ he predestined _____ for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given _____ in the One he loves. ⁷ In him _____ has redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on _____ (Ephesians 1:4-8).

If God showed favoritism, he wouldn’t have chosen me and he wouldn’t have chosen you.

So that leads us to the question, do we see people in the same way as our Father?

The easy answer is “yes!” The real question is, “Who is our father?”

Jesus offended some Jewish leaders who rejected him when he said that they were just like their father the devil (John 8:44).

When you and I show prejudice, when we look down on those who look differently than we do, think differently than we do, act differently than we do, we are acting like the devil who loves to puff us up with pride.

But listen to the way Jesus talks about the heavenly Father in his Sermon on the Mount:

“Your Father in heaven... causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous, [on black and white, on Republican and Democrat, on gay and straight, on the banker and the beggar]. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:45-48).

When the Father values us, he doesn't necessarily value everything we say or do. Let us strive to be like our Father, to see people as he sees them. We don't have to agree with everything someone says or does to value them as individuals, precious to God and precious to us.

This is the first step in overcoming the natural prejudice that lies in each of our hearts.

So the question I want you to consider as we bring this first part to a close is this: Who is the “them” that makes you uncomfortable? Pause for a moment and honestly consider... how does prejudice slip into your thinking about people different than you... racially, politically, even religiously? Then...

2. Step into the place of discomfort.

Peter's place of discomfort was a Gentile home.

“You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection” (Acts 10:28-29).

If we see every individual as equally precious in God's sight, then God is also calling us to step into a place of discomfort to bridge the divide that separates us.

For me this week, there were two places of discomfort that I stepped into. Joni saw that the movie *Selma* was available on Netflix. We watched it on Sunday afternoon. It took us back to the civil rights days of the 1960's. It opened my eyes to better understand the experiences that have

led to the racial divide in our country today. Then later that night I watched the documentary *13th* about how discrimination continues right up to the present time.

Some of our high school students have been privileged to go on a trip to Selma and other key places in the civil rights struggle. God be praised that you are stepping into that place of discomfort and can help lead the way bridging the racial divide.

Another place of discomfort I stepped into this past week was the Passion Conference. Four us leaders went to Atlanta to see how this conference was reaching 18-25 year old adults. I was definitely out of my element. I was too old. My clothes weren't in style. My wife will tell you that I can't even clap along to music.

But I went because I wanted to overcome that natural prejudice that causes me to judge those of a different generation than mine. I stepped into that place of discomfort to learn from them.

So this is my second question for you to consider: "What is the place of discomfort to which God is calling you?" Pause for a moment and consider that question. How can you, even in a small way, step into a place of discomfort to learn about someone "different" than you. Then...

3. Share what you know

Overcoming the racial, the generational, and the political divides that are present in our country is a noble goal in and of itself. God's church has a higher purpose. We not only want to value those different from ourselves because it is a godly thing to do. We want our overcoming of prejudice to be one of the ways that God opens the door of eternal life to the people around us.

This is why I chose to begin the message with the video of Matt Hasselbeck realizing something about his mission. I realize that there are things that divide me from some of the people who are in your area of influence. Some of them may be those "prejudices," and some may simply be that your friend speaks "sports" and I don't. Or your friend speaks "music" and I don't.

So what I say here from the stage may not be exactly what the people who are different from you and different from me need to hear. But my goal is not really to personally become "all things to all people" (1 Corinthians 9:22) but to train you to become all things to all people so that by every possible means we might save some.

So how do you share your faith?

Peter in our lesson gives us an example.

First of all, when he steps into Cornelius' household, he doesn't judge them. Instead he steps into that place of discomfort to listen. "Be quick to listen" (James 1:19). Listen to their story.

Then ask if you can share your story.

This is where I again want to pause and ask you to jot down some notes. What is your personal “My Story”? How has Jesus changed your life? Let me give you my current story.

I wish I could remember every day that I’m baptized, I’d be in such a better place. Can I tell you why?

I struggle with perfectionism. I want to be perfect in the eyes of others. I want to be the perfect pastor, husband, father. The harder I try, the more I feel I disappoint people. And then when they ask me for something, I often lash out in anger and frustration... It is just one more thing I will end up failing to do!

But over the last few years I’ve fallen in love with baptism. In Ephesians 5 it talks about how Christ gave himself up for the church, cleansing her in the waters of baptism. Then it says he presents the church to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any blemish but holy and blameless.

I picture all the brides who have walked down the aisle toward me as a pastor. None of them had a stain on their dress. They were careful not to wrinkle their dress. And in the eyes of their husbands, waiting at the foot of the aisle, they were absolutely perfect. He was eager to spend the rest of his life with this woman.

That’s the promise that Jesus gives me in my baptism. Jesus looks down the aisle of my life and he doesn’t see all my failures. Instead he sees his perfection wrapped around me like a wedding garment. I’m absolutely perfect in his sight, and he can’t wait to spend eternity with me.

I just want, every day, to remember that I’m baptized. Are you baptized? Have you ever thought of your baptism that way?

By the way, if some of you aren’t baptized, or aren’t sure, mark it on the connection card. Let’s sit down and talk about it.

That’s my story. What’s yours? How has Jesus changed your life? If you had just a minute to say how Jesus’ impacted your life, what experience would you relate? I’ll give you a minute to think about that right now. Write down some thoughts so that you can expand on it in the days ahead.

Musical pause

How do we value those who are different from us?

First, celebrate that God doesn’t show favoritism. He loved you even though you didn’t deserve it. Every person who is “different” from you is equally precious to God.

Second, step into a place of discomfort to hear their story. Listen!

Third, share your story. Tell how Jesus has made a difference in your life.

Finally, share God's story with them. Isn't that our ultimate goal? Peter was able to share with the people in Cornelius' household "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" (Acts 10:38).

That is the final step in this process. If you truly love the people that are in your area of influence, both those who are part of your "tribe" and those who are different from you, you'll want to share God's story with them.

So here is my last question for you: What are you doing to make God's story apart of your story every day?

Are you reading the Bible every day? Are you in a Bible study? On the Connection Card there are four different opportunities to register to know God's story better. A new study has just started in the Grace Room where you can sit at the feet of our seminary president. Make a commitment today to know God's story for yourself, for those like you, and especially for those who are different from you... those whom God loves... and by God's powerful grace... we love too. Amen.

Prepared by Pastor Peter Panitzke
414-422-0320 ext. 122
ppanitzke@stpaulmuskego.org