

Acts 10:34 – Love In, Love Out

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.”

Our world is filled with partiality, with favoritism, with division. In Peter’s day it was Jew/Gentile. Think of some today. There is no shortage of them. Heterosexual/homosexual, pro-choice/pro-life, republican/democrat, black/white, and the list goes on. We make divisions and distinctions all the time, and because of them we tend to look at people differently – it’s hard not to. But God does not. He shows no partiality. Because in God’s eyes, no matter what side of those divisions you’re on, we’ve all got this in common: we’re all sinners; we all deserve nothing from Him. And on that playing field, we’re all equal. Whatever you have, whatever you have been given, whoever you are is a gift from your God, who gave it to you not because you deserved it, but because He loves you. He loves all people. And He wants all to be His children. Us and them.

God sent His child to love us, to befriend us, that we may be His friends and love Him and each other in return. No matter who you are, no matter who they are. And that love is clearly the focus of the readings today. If you’re going to take one thing away from those readings today, remember that. **[Jesus said:] “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”**

Which sounds simple, doesn’t it? But it’s not quite that simple. For two reasons. First, we have to know what love is. And second, how can we love in a world as divided and divisive as ours?

I’ll tackle the second one first: how can we love in a world as divided and divisive as ours? John gave us the answer in the Epistle: this is the victory that has overcome the world – that overcomes the divisions and partiality and favoritism of the world – our faith. Not that our faith is so great, because often it’s not. One day our faith is strong and the next day it’s weak and frightened. One day it’s up and the next days it’s down and doubting. But our faith overcomes the world not because it’s so great, but because the One our faith is in. Because our faith is in the One who has overcome the world and all the things of the world and the ruler of this world – Satan. In His death and resurrection, Jesus has provided us with everything we need for both this life and the next. There is nothing we need that He hasn’t promised and nothing He has promised that He won’t deliver.

The problem is: we don’t believe it. We do, but we don’t. We do, we say we do, we try to, but the evidence shows otherwise. And the evidence that we don’t is that we keep on sinning. We take because we don’t trust Him to provide. We hurt because we don’t trust Him to protect. We lust because we don’t love Him but the things of this world. We rebel because we don’t trust the authorities He has placed over us. And that’s just to name a few. We take matters into our own hands because we think we can do better.

But the God who loves you provides for you even in this – giving you the forgiveness that you need in Jesus for all that and more and strengthening the faith He has given you to trust

and believe. To know that when He calls you His friend, when He calls you His child, that is not something He takes lightly. Those aren't just words. Jesus laid down His life for you and traded places with you to make it so. And compared to that, everything else you need pales in comparison.

And to this truth, John tells us, **the Spirit, the water, and the blood testify**. In our first reading from Acts, we see this testimony. The Spirit testified as it came upon the Gentiles as Peter preached to them. Through the Word the Spirit worked and came, testifying that yes, these Gentiles were His children and He their Savior and He loved them. And then the water testified as Peter baptized them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit – just as Jesus had commanded him to do. To baptize all nations in His Name – no partiality or favoritism or distinction – all nations. Jesus sent Peter carefully and specifically to the Gentile Cornelius and his family to show just this – and to testify that His blood, shed on the cross, was for all people. That there is no one on earth that Jesus did not lay down His life for. No one.

The victory of Christ's that is ours by faith enables us to love. Or as a continuation of the Gospel that we heard last week: Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. And so connected to Him and abiding in Him, He abides in us and gives us His love – His no partiality, no favoritism, love - that we may love others with that love.

Which leads, then, to that second point: to love others we have to know what love is. The world thinks, or claims it knows what love is. But does it?

Jesus showed us what love is when He laid down His life for the life of the world. He showed us a love that wasn't a feeling, that wasn't looking out for what it wanted, but an action that does what is best for the other. And then He spelled out specifically what that looks like for us in the commandments, which, if you do them, you'll truly be laying down your life for others. Both those who agree with us and those who do not. Because love doesn't distinguish, divide, or show partiality or favoritism. Love just acts. Like Jesus did. Laying down His life for sinners, for criminals, for mixed up and messed up folks like you and me. Not to make us servants or force us into labor or service to Him, but to make us His friends, His children. Willing, united, connected to Him.

And to do that, Jesus was no weak and wimpy pushover. That's usually the picture of love that pops into people's heads, isn't it? Weak and wimpy and easily pushed around. But that wasn't Jesus. He loved enough to speak the truth, and He loved enough to do love – even to those who didn't love Him – all the way to the cross.

Now the question is: what will that look like for you and me? Specifically. Because that's always where doctrine gets tough. As long as teaching is just theory, it's easy. When it gets real and practical, it's tough.

So let's frame that love in terms of some very hot-button issues in our world today. Loving by speaking strongly and doing even more strongly.

We will speak and not stop speaking the truth that God created man and woman and that these are the only two genders there are, and that when a man and a woman are united as one flesh, that is a marriage.

We will speak and not stop speaking the truth that God created life and loves life – all life – no matter how small or weak or disabled, no matter who you are, and that for us to kill or otherwise dispose of any life is contrary to His will.

We will speak and not stop speaking the truth that Jesus is the one and only Savior from sin, that He is the one and only Son of God made man, and that there is salvation in no one but Him.

We will speak and not stop speaking these truths (and others) because it is loving to do so.

But at the same time, for teaching these truths, we will be – and already are – called unloving, bigoted, hateful, dangerous, and not welcomed in society. For these truths Christians are being targeted, persecuted, and killed, and perhaps the day is coming and is not so far away when folks will show up outside of our little church and picket us, or worse. When, like is already happening in other places, pastors or others who speak out are jailed, or a bulldozer will show up and level our church. And this, all in the name of love.

Here's the question: how will we respond? Will we give in and change what we believe and teach? Will we fight back with equal and opposite violence and force? Or will we continue to love? And again, not weak and wimpy love – but love that continues to speak the truth, and at the same time does love. Imagine if we did that. That while continuing to speak the truth, we gave food and water to those picketing us? If we helped to repair the house of the guy who bulldozed our church? If we stood up for those who threw our pastor in jail? It would take a lot of strength and love to do those things! But what message would it send? What love would it show? Would some ridicule us? Surely. Would some take advantage of us? Certainly. But would some also take notice of such faith and love, hear of the truth of Jesus and come to faith?

Now those are big things and perhaps hypothetical things right now. But what about the little things that you could do right now? What would such love look like in your life right now? And realize how Christ-like all those actions are. The One who loved though rejected and crucified.

The Spirit, the water, and the blood still testify today. The Spirit that has come upon us and lives within us, testifying to the love of Christ for all people, and helping us do that love. The water testifying as all nations are baptized into Jesus – who still wants all to be His friends, His children. And the blood testifying, as the Body and Blood of Jesus are given to us for the forgiveness of our sins. For the favoritism and partiality that we do show, for our lack of love and failure to trust. For when we come up here and stand here there are no distinctions or divisions; it is as equals – no matter who you are – equally sinful beggars, equally unworthy receivers.

But the Spirit, the water, and the blood testify that there is no sin too great, no sinner too far gone. There is no condemnation in Jesus, only outside of Him. And He invites us to abide in Him and His truth – to repent and receive His forgiveness and His life and live it. To love even those who wish us dead, like they wanted Jesus dead. And they did it. They killed Him. And now risen from the dead, He lives to forgive us and all. That we rise from sin, rise from death, and live with Him, in love, even now. And you are His – His friend, His child. So love one another, and don't worry about yourself. For with His love, you can never out-love, out-give, or out-care what He has for you.