

January 13, 2008 – The Baptism of Our Lord Acts 10:34-38

You and I play favorites all the time, don't we? We're far more likely to treat well someone who has treated us well. But people who are unkind to us – or people we don't even know – why go out of your way to help them?

What if God played favorites? What if He only offered His love and His eternal home to only a few select groups of people – like only those who have freckles...or only those who have curly hair...or only those who live in France?

At the time of Christ, many among the Jews felt God only loved them, the people with Abraham's blood flowing through their veins. He played favorites. The Gentiles, the non-Jews, He could never love. Even Jesus' followers had a hard time accepting that God wants the gospel to go to all people, for He loves all people.

Peter had received an emphatic revelation through a repeated vision -- a sheet filled with all kinds of unclean animals, and God's command -- get up and eat! Cornelius, a Gentile, had also received a vision to ask Peter to come to his house. Our reading, part of Peter's startling realization, emphasizes for you and me, **“Jesus is Savior for all!”**

Let's remember again who Jesus is. Peter testifies, **“You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.”** Cornelius like many others would have no doubt heard of Jesus, his teaching and his miracles. Cornelius also knew that Jesus had died on the cross, and that there were startling reports about a resurrection. Peter now declares beyond the shadow of a doubt, Jesus is Lord *of all*.

What our reason cannot comprehend, God reveals for our salvation. God is one eternal Being in three distinct Persons. God the Son assumed human nature, when the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary conceived His human body. At His baptism, the Father declared, “This is my Son!” The Holy Spirit descended on Him so that all would know He is the Messiah whom God had promised.

Jesus had come into the world to seek and save the lost of every nation, race, nationality, or color. All people need forgiveness of sins, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. All people need Jesus, the Savior from sin, even among those who seem so righteous on the outside. Your own good works, your prayers, and your acts of charity cannot earn God's favor.

So God the Holy Spirit uses the Law to lead people to recognize and admit their sin and unworthiness. The Holy Spirit uses the gospel news of Jesus to give people a rebirth to a living faith in Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Thank the Lord He doesn't show favoritism. Jesus, who is true God, came to save us all because God loves us all!

Do you often drift from the Lord in spiritual apathy? Do you often do just the opposite, try to pave your own highway to heaven by the things you do. Do you often fall into the pit of despair when you realize your sins?

Do you often drag regret and guilt around like a ball and chain? Remember you've been baptized according to Jesus' command and promise. God placed His Name on you and adopted you into His family. The Creator of the Cosmos became your heavenly Father, loving you and caring for you every day of your life. The Son, who died bearing the curse of your sin and rose winning eternal life for you became your Savior. He gave you personally all the blessings He earned by His holy life, death, and resurrection. God the Holy Spirit came to you to set you apart as one of God's own. He gave you the gift of faith in Jesus and restored within you the image of God. Yes, the Spirit worked in the water through the Word, and changed us from death to life, from despair to hope, from the chaos of sin to the peace of God's forgiveness.

Since we're now united to Christ and He lives in us by faith in Him, the Father says of us, “My

son, my daughter, whom I love, in whom I am pleased!” As God’s child, you won’t want to continue in sin, will you? No, you’ll daily repent of your sin and daily rise as from the dead to live a new life to God’s glory. That’s what the washing with water in baptism signifies. That is why we place the call to repent and confession of sin at the front of our worship. We shed any pretence and cling to the cross of Christ where He paid for our sin. We rejoice to hear and believe the good news of forgiveness! Only through this unique person, Jesus, do we receive a new life – eternal life!

Look again at the unique *work* Jesus did to save us. Peter relates, **“You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached -- 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.”** During Jesus earthly ministry, He humbled Himself. He put himself in the position of needing the Holy Spirit, just as He put himself in the position of needing to commune with His heavenly Father through prayer. Receiving the Holy Spirit according to His human nature, He went about doing good. He obeyed the Law as the second Adam. He earned a righteous standing for us before God. He delivered all who trusted in Him from the devil’s dominion of darkness. Everything is all right between God and us through Jesus. On Calvary’s cross He bore the brunt of God’s wrath against sinners. He paid the full price and met the terms of the peace treaty between God and man, written in His own lifeblood. **“Everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.”**

What will our response be? Won’t we also be dedicated to doing God’s good will in every way? But how far can our meager and humble service go in glorifying Christ or carrying out His plans? Let me tell you about one poor Scottish farmer named Fleming who did a simple act of kindness. He heard a cry for help from a bog near where he was working. He dropped his tools, ran, and found a terrified boy waist deep in black muck. He was screaming and struggling desperately to free himself. Fleming saved the lad from what could have been a slow and terrifying death.

The next day an elegant carriage pulled up to the Scotsman’s humble house. The nobleman who stepped out introduced himself as the father of the boy Fleming had saved. He said, “I want to repay you. You saved my son’s life.” Fleming waved off the offer saying, “I can’t accept any payment.” At that moment the farmer’s son came around the corner. The nobleman offered, “I’ll make you a deal. You won’t accept any payment, but let me give your son a good education.” And he did. Later he was known as Sir Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of penicillin. Some years after that the nobleman’s son was stricken with pneumonia and was saved by the penicillin. That nobleman’s son, saved by farmer Fleming from the muck, then saved by his son with penicillin, was grew up to be called Sir Winston Churchill.

God, who is infinitely greater than we, places the right people in the right place at the right time. He sent His Son at the right time to save all of us. His person and His work as Savior are unique. He now sends you and me, His unique people, created new in our baptism, and equipped with the Spirit to do unique work to His glory and the welfare of others. And who knows how far the effects of your life of love for Jesus will go? Amen.