

“Receive, Believe and Become”

Acts 10:34-48, Easter 6-B, May 6, 2018

One of the questions people often ask is why did God choose the Jewish people to be his very own special people; especially when there were so many other different **“PEOPLE GROUPS”** (or ethnicities) alive in this world at that time, from which God could easily have chosen?

Why didn't God adopt the **Egyptians**, or the **Hittites**, or the **Inca people**, for that matter, to become **his very own special people**?

In **DEUTERONOMY 7:7-8**, we are told that **God chose the people of Israel** to be his **“OWN TREASURED POSSESSION”** not because they were **more numerous**, or **more powerful** than **any other people**, but God chose them simply because **He loved them** and made them the **object of his affection**; and because He (God) was **KEEPING AN OATH THAT HE HAD SWORN TO THEIR FOREBEARS; ESPECIALLY TO THE PATRIARCH ABRAHAM**.

Nowhere does the Bible ever say, however, that God chose the people of Israel to the exclusion of all other peoples! Heavens, no! **FOR THE VERY OPPOSITE IS TRUE!**

When God made his first Covenant with Abram, God told Abram: **“One day, all the nations of the earth will be blessed through your ‘seed,’ or your ‘offspring,’ Abram!”**

And St. Paul is quick to point out to us in **Galatians 3:16**, that the Old Testament record does not say “through Abraham and to **his offsprings (plural)**”, but instead through Abraham and his **“offspring (singular)”** who is **JESUS CHRIST!**

If you were to ask me to summarize for you what the **First Lesson** from **ACTS 10:34-48** is really all about, I would like to summarize it for you like this. It's all about the **SURPRISING WORK OF GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT!** And that's why I'd like to present three words before you this morning for your consideration, all about the surprising work of God the Holy Spirit! These three words are the words: **“RECEIVE,” “BELIEVE”** and **“BECOME!”**

THE FIRST WORD I WANT TO SHARE WITH YOU IS THE WORD “RECEIVE.” This **WORD** is a reminder to us that the **Holy Spirit** comes to us according to **his own calendar and not ours!** The **Holy Spirit** is not like a pet dog that we can train to walk or sit or lie down when we shout the right command!

Do you remember hearing about that magnificent conversation that Jesus had with a man named Nicodemus, one evening? Yes, it was a rather clandestine meeting because it took place privately, perhaps, maybe even at midnight, or in the wee hours of the morning!

On that night, Jesus told Nicodemus that the Holy Spirit, in some respects, is like the **WIND**. **“The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know**

where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8)!

I came across an interesting little story recently about some great missionary work that is taking place in the African nation of Ghana. Ghana, like South Carolina, gets very hot in the summer. But unlike South Carolina there is **not much in the way of air conditioning among the poor people in the nation of Ghana!**

Nevertheless, they were grateful that even though they were working with extremely limited funds, these new Christians **RECENTLY BUILT THEIR VERY FIRST SANCTUARY, although they didn't have enough money to put any windows in the open portals, on the sides of this primitive building, where the windows were supposed to go!**

Looking for the silver lining around every cloud, or better yet, doing their best to be thankful at all times and actively rejoicing in the LORD's presence at all times, **the windowless sanctuary portals became the conduit to at least let a little bit of air and cool breeze into their sanctuary during worship services!**

The only problem was that those gentle breezes could sometimes instantly turn into a very strong breeze; so that all the papers being used in their worship services could easily become blown out of peoples' hands and high into the air. Sometimes wind blew the pianist musical sheets completely off the piano and sometimes the preacher's sermon notes would be lifted off the pulpit and blown helter-skelter; all throughout that sizeable room they were in!

Eventually the people decided that having the wind blowing through their sanctuary on days like that was no longer acceptable, about the same time they had received donations for those windows to be put into their sanctuary, from offerings that came to this infant Christian congregation, from other parts of the world! ---- But wouldn't you know it! No sooner had this happened, when one day a gigantic, unexpected gust of wind blew through that particular region of Ghana and blew the roof completely off the church! The lesson is that you can't dictate how the Holy Spirit will work in the Church! And yet wasn't this a lesson that St. Peter still had to learn from the Holy Spirit himself sometime after that first Pentecost? Being open to God the Holy Spirit's, filling you with his own powerful presence, is to a large degree, what it means to receive the Holy Spirit.

In the opening verses from Acts 10 today, St. Peter had just been brought to a powerful new realization himself, through his personal interaction with a Gentile named Cornelius, who was a Centurion, a military officer in the Roman Army! But Cornelius was also a man who had grown to have a great appreciation for the Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures; a man who had himself become a “God-Fearer;” meaning that he had become a proselyte, a convert, to Judaism, but still was not considered to be a 100% a full-fledge Jew because he had not allowed himself, up to this point at least, to become circumcised.

Peter must have been fully overcome with emotion when he shouted these words out loud for anyone who was within earshot of being able to hear what St Peter was confessing: ***“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” (v. 34)!***

And very soon then, in **verse 36**, Peter gets to the main message of his sermon: ***“You yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power! He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him!”***

Certainly, St. Peter came to understand--what the New Testament calls upon each of us also to understand! **The reason the Gospel is Good News of Peace is that apart from the saving work of Jesus Christ, God’s only-begotten Son, we are not -- nor ever could be “AT PEACE WITH GOD”!**

Apart from the Gospel of Jesus Christ, my friends, St. Peter’s sobering reminder to you and me today is that we are not at peace with God. We are at war with God. In **Ephesians 2:3-7**, St Paul reminds us that apart from the Gospel--we are under God’s wrath! Paul writes: ***“We were, by nature, children of wrath, like the rest of mankind! But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved--and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:3-7)!***

To some degree, **the world says: “I’m Okay; You’re Okay”** but God says that everything is not okay! God says that the world, left to itself, is in rebellion against him! Humanity, by nature, wants to fight God to the death. And this is precisely what the world proposed to do, and what God allowed to happen, when **his only-begotten Son did take on our human flesh and blood!**

Nevertheless, in raising his Son from the dead, Peter is shouting out to the Jewish people become Christians, in the presence of a number of Gentile people, who by the Spirit’s power were about to become Christians too that Jesus is “LORD OF ALL;” meaning that Jesus was not only the Savior of the Jewish people but of the Gentile peoples too!

But listen again to the supreme importance that St. Peter, like St. Paul also, always puts on preaching about the cross of Jesus Christ. ***“Sinful people put the Lord of glory to death by hanging him on a tree, 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” (v. 39)!***

Peter stresses the opportunities that he and the other disciples had to eat with Christ and to drink with Christ, because this was a way of saying that Christ’s resurrection was a real resurrection!

In their experience with the Risen Christ, these disciples were not dealing with some kind of mystical appearance of a disembodied Christ! It was not merely some sort of vague understanding some people want to promote in the Church of Jesus Christ today--that "Jesus died, but what he stood for, lives on!"

The disciples were **not suffering from a group hallucination** as if they loved him so much that they just couldn't bear the thought of having him dead and so imagined that they saw him in various places! No, it was a real resurrection!

The second word I want to share with you is the word "believe."

Here, Peter, was pleading with the people who were listening to him not **only to receive his message, but also to believe in the truthfulness of the message he was sharing with them too!** When Peter got to the end of his message, he gave what I would call an application, or an invitation! Peter says, ***"All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him, receives the forgiveness of sins through his name" (v. 43)!***

The third word I want to share with you is the word "become."

Once there was a rich man. He met and fell in love with a young maiden. She was lovely in form, and lovelier still in character. He rejoiced when he saw her. Yet he grieved also, for he knew that he was not like her. His face was hideous and his heart was cruel. Nevertheless, he greatly considered how he could win her hand in marriage!

Eventually, he hit upon a plan. He went to see a mask-maker, to whom he said: "Make me a mask that I shall become handsome. Then, perhaps, I may win the love of this noble young woman!"

The mask-maker did as he was asked. The man was transformed into a handsome figure. He tried his hardest to become a person as lovely in his character, disposition, and behavior towards this beautiful woman and others as his newfound appearance, at least superficially, would have suggested that he be!

Thankfully, all of this was sufficient to win the heart and hand of the fair maiden. He asked her for her hand in marriage, to which she responded, "Yes!" and before you know it, they were married. Ten years of happiness followed. But the man knew he was carrying a secret. He sensed that true love could not be founded on deceit!

The day came when he really had to know if his wife would have loved him for whom he truly was or not; if she loved the man behind the mask. So one day, with a heavy heart and trembling hand, he knocked a second time on the mask-maker's door. "It's time to remove the mask!" he said. He walked slowly and anxiously back to his home. He greeted his wife.

To his astonishment, she made no comment, nor showed any untoward reaction. There was no scream, no horror, no revulsion. He searched for a mirror.

This husband couldn't believe it! He looked into the mirror but he saw no ugliness, but a face as handsome as the mask; a face so different from his original face. He was amazed and overjoyed--but at the same time bewildered and confused!

He ran back to the mask-maker to find some kind of reasonable explanation.

The mask-maker said, "You have changed. You loved a beautiful person. You have become beautiful too! You have become beautiful through loving her. You become like the face of the one you love!"

My brothers and sisters, the ACTS OF THE APOSTLES is not just the story of the sudden, spontaneous acts of the Holy Spirit. It is also the story of how people who love Jesus become much more like Jesus, over time, themselves! It is the story of the slow formation of a new community of believers that was made up of both Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, men and women, oppressor and oppressed, of the slow becoming of the body of Christ out of people who had known so many dividing walls of hostility--before Jesus came along!

The work of the Holy Spirit is not only about our receiving the message, nor is it only about our believing the message! The work of the Holy Spirit is also about our being made more and more into the likeness of Christ, as we live in the power of our Baptism from day to day!

I want to close my sermon today by sharing with you two verses from Paul's **SECOND LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT CORINTH, CHAPTER 3:17-18**: ***"Now the LORD is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit!"*** Amen