



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

What We See Is What We Are

SERMON BY REV. SU KIM ■ AUGUST 29, 2021

Introduction

Last week, we learned that Cornelius and Peter were providentially brought together by God. Peter, a poor fisherman from Galilee, and Cornelius, a powerful centurion of the Italian Cohort, probably should have hated each other but through their story, redemptive history was changed. We learned from Acts 10:1-33 that *what you see is what you are*. As disciples of Christ, those who follow a different Master, we each must recognize how God sees us, how we see others, and how we see God. Last week's focus was on the individual; today, our focus is corporate: *What we see is what we are*.

We will pick up the story in Acts 10:34 right where we left off last week. Cornelius had just told his side of the story, and now he and all those he had gathered in his house are waiting with eager anticipation to hear what the Lord has to say through Peter.

So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality,³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.³⁶ As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all),³⁷ you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed:³⁸ 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.³⁹ And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging

him on a tree, ⁴⁰but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, ⁴¹not 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. ⁴²And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Peter said that God shows no partiality; He makes no distinction in His reaction to people based upon gender, race, socioeconomic status, or anything else. All people have the same access to God through Jesus Christ, facilitated by the Holy Spirit. Nothing else in their background matters.

As the text tells us, those gathered were familiar with Jesus, but it was not until Peter preached that they recognized the **significance** of Jesus. Peter told his listeners the Good News of Jesus Christ: His life, death, and resurrection. Through Christ’s sacrifice, everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness. The Bible says,

⁴⁴While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. ⁴⁵And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, ⁴⁷“Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” ⁴⁸And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

This was Peter’s last sermon in the Book of Acts. He and the six men who had gone with him, all of whom were devout Jews, acknowledged that Cornelius and those he had gathered received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Baptism by water is a sacrament, a sign pointing to the reality of the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Holy Spirit signaled that the Gentiles were included in the community of Christ’s followers. This was surprising to both Peter and the Jewish men who had come with him.

What we see is what we are.

As devout Jews, Peter and those who had traveled with him had considered Gentiles as common or unclean, but now they were included in God's family. Followers of Christ today must remember that the Spirit of God can move in surprising and unexpected ways. God is Sovereign. Things like the Sinner's Prayer of repentance, the Roman's Road to salvation, the Four Spiritual Laws for sharing the good news of salvation, etc., are tools to explain the gospel of Jesus Christ and to lead others to make a personal decision to follow Him. They are helpful, but there is no exact formula or right way to be saved. Christianity is not a religion; it is a relationship. That means it does not and should not start with religious steps; it should start with a relationship with Jesus Christ.

The text does not say that Cornelius and those he had gathered did anything to signal their response or to outwardly accept the message. Compare that to Acts 2 where those who heard Peter's sermon were cut to the heart and asked Peter and the others what they should do to be saved. Perhaps those gathered with Cornelius believed upon hearing Peter's words and were given the gift of repentance. We do not know, but we do know that the agape love of God burst forth and embraced Cornelius, his family, and his close friends.

The Book of Acts was written by Luke who describes God's love in Luke 15. It is God who goes after the one lost sheep; He searches the entire house for a lost coin; He patiently loves wayward sons. Jesus said there is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents—can you imagine the joy in heaven the day that Cornelius, his family, and all those he had called together were saved?

Did you know there was rejoicing in heaven when you first believed in Jesus Christ? When was that for you? How old were you when you first recognized that you were a sinner, but that God loved you? Where were you when you accepted Christ's agape love for you? When did you know that He would never leave or forsake you? How did you feel when you realized that you had the gift of eternal life? Did you know there was rejoicing over you in heaven that day?

The Gentiles asked Peter and the men who had come with him to remain for several days. They wanted to be with the Jews, and the Jews

wanted to be with them. What a beautiful picture of harmony and unity that is available in Christ; but there was an issue. Acts 11 begins:

11 Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, ³“You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

Remember, *what we see is what we are*. This challenged early Christian thinking of what it meant to be the holy people of God. The early church in Jerusalem was made up primarily of devout Jews who believed in the good news of Jesus Christ, but as devout Jews, they saw Gentiles as common and unclean people who would need to observe the Law of Moses, including abstaining from unclean food and being circumcised as signs of their participation in the covenant. These Christians were careful in how they related to Gentiles just as Peter had been before the events in Caesarea. Circumcision and table fellowship would continue to be issues throughout the early history of the church and are addressed in various portions of the New Testament.

Even today some followers of Christ put up barriers by requiring seekers to clean themselves up and get things right to be acceptable and welcome into God’s family. But every believer is saved by grace and grace alone! We do not need to clean ourselves up before we can be accepted by God. The Bible is clear that we cannot clean ourselves up. Only through a relationship with God and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit can we be transformed! Acts 11 continues:

⁴But Peter began and explained it to them in order: ⁵“I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. ⁶Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. ⁷And I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸But I said, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹But the voice answered a second time from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, do not call common.’ ¹⁰This happened three times,

and all was drawn up again into heaven. ¹¹And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. ¹²And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' ¹⁵As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" ¹⁸When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

Peter explained himself in this story which we have now heard four times in some form. Luke's repetition shows how important this incident is in understanding what God was doing. Peter described this as an extension of Pentecost where the Spirit fell upon those who responded to the gospel with God-given faith and repentance in Acts 2. If God gives the gift and is clearly at work, how could Peter object?

In Acts 5, the Apostles kept preaching and the Spirit performed signs and wonders through them. They were brought before an enraged council that wanted to kill them. Then a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law who was held in honor by all the people, said this:

"So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; ³⁹but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" So they took his advice ... (Acts 5:38-39)

That proved to be true. They were not able to overthrow what God was doing. Our gathering here for worship today is a testament to that. In this story, God was guiding, and Peter recognized it. Our God is Sovereign.

His plans cannot and will not be stopped. He is in control. He has guided redemptive history; He will continue to guide redemptive history.

Upon hearing Gamaliel, the complaints were silenced. The people glorified God for His initiative in granting the Gentiles the repentance which leads to life. There were still questions and underlying issues that would come up later, but all the believers recognized that God was behind this. They glorified Him for His leading and His great love. That is how this story ends.

Conclusion

What we see is what we are. Some of the early Christians had reservations and criticisms about Gentiles being included in their Christian community; this was their worldview as devout Jews. But through Jesus Christ and His redemptive work on the cross, everyone can now come to Him just as they are. Anyone who repents, turns from their sins, follows, trusts in, and obeys our Lord has eternal life.

Eternal life is not something in the future. When I was a kid, I had the view that eternal life meant that when I died, I would become a chubby angel floating around the sky with a harp. No! Eternal life in Christ ... that life starts now! You can have a relationship with Almighty God. You can enjoy fellowship and communion with the Sovereign Lord. You can know true happiness, true joy, true delight, true contentment, and true peace today! What God has made clean, His people must not call common or unclean. God makes those who trust in His Son clean. He meets us where we are, as we are. He does not leave us as we are—He transforms us. Not only that, but God also commissions and commands His body to go forward as His witnesses. We are Christ's body which must impact what we see. *What we see is what we are.*

Let me offer three applications for us as Christ's body from today's text. First, as Christ's body, we must **see the body as God sees it**. The Bible says that the Church is His Bride. What a wild thought! The Church can seem broken, but that is not how God sees it. Men, I realize that is a bit of a stretch—to see yourself as a bride—but I want you to think back to your wedding day when you first laid eyes on your bride. That is how God sees His Bride. That is how God sees this church as a part of His Church—as His Bride; we are united.

The Apostle Paul wrote concerning Jews and Gentiles, “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:14). Through His work on the cross and victory over death, He has made us one. Paul continued, “In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22). He made us one so that we might be built up to be a dwelling place for God. We are not a Christian club; we are a dwelling place for Almighty God. What binds us and unites us is not where we grew up, our common interests, the color of our skin, our age, or our socioeconomic status.

Last week, we held a Discover First membership class, and the church backgrounds of the attendees were very diverse: Baptists, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Pentecostals. What unites us is the firm belief and hope in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit of God. We are united as one body. Here at First Church, we do not have a target demographic. Some large churches even had a target individual in mind when they started. Our church seeks to welcome all who are curious about God and those who love and want to serve the Lord. All are welcome. Because we do not have a target demographic, our church has many generations under one, big green roof. That is a beautiful thing! Joel 2, which is quoted in Acts 2, says that when the Lord pours out His Spirit on all people, “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.” Young and old will be filled with the Spirit of God.

We do not just put up with one another, we embrace one another and learn from one another. For example, for those who volunteer and serve with our Family Ministries, it is not just for the benefit of the kids and families, it is for their benefit as well. A child can speak to us. There is no junior Holy Spirit. The same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead dwells in and empowers even the youngest members of First Church who have put their faith and hope in Jesus Christ. In the same way, the younger families have much to gain and benefit from the warmth and wisdom of the more seasoned members of our congregation. We need one another, and we are better together. We see how God sees because *what we see is what we are.*

Second, as Christ's body, we must **see the opportunities God gives**. You may have heard the saying, "Can't see the forest for the trees." Being preoccupied with minor details results in not seeing the big picture. But perhaps in this information age where we have all the world's news all the time, we are distracted by the forest. Personally, when I focus on the big problems all over the world, I feel a bit overwhelmed. And while those big problems are important, focusing too intently on those issues may cause us to miss the opportunities God is giving us. Like Peter, our God has things for us to do **here**. He has people He wants to send us to **here**. As His body, we must be available to the Spirit of God. We must be obedient. We must be ready to share the good news. Our church continues to be involved in missions around the corner and around the world. We support 53 missionaries and mission organizations operating in 30 countries around the world.

In today's Scripture, God's opportunities started with prayer. So let us take a minute to pray now. Ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate an opportunity He has for you. Perhaps it is to serve in a ministry in this intergenerational church. Perhaps it is in your community or your family. As His body, we must see the opportunities that God gives us because *what we see is what we are*.

Finally, as Christ's body, we must **see God**. I am so grateful to serve in this church because I have seen the beauty and love of Christ in and through so many of you, and that is my heart's desire: I want to see Jesus. I was talking with a friend about how hopeless it would be if we did not have a firm hope that one day God will make all things right, that one day God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and that one day God will make all things new. Those around us need to hear this message; they need to see God. We all must see God. I want to "look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace" (from *Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus* by Helen H. Lemmel).

What we see is what we are. ■

