

Sermon 1-12-20  
Paul Purdue preaching

Darren's intro

The marketing gods serenade us with siren songs of newer innovations, fresher experiences, and more amazing stuff that will satisfy our souls. Spend time with us. You earned it. It will pay off. You're worth it. We even ask "what we do for a living," as if work is life. The Civil Religion of Consumerism struggles to understand the Creator's economic model: *All this is God's gift, offered to us without price.* Faith, hope, and love come to us as gifts. We often fail to value the priceless: community, compassion, creativity, forgiveness, friendship, grace, goodness, honor, integrity, justice, joy, kindness, peace, patience, steadfastness, self-control, and wisdom.

Over the next few weeks we will focus on our baptism. As we think about our vows, it is easy to think that baptism is about us. However, baptism is about God's working in and through us. We ask for a little miracle with every baptism - that God's power might be revealed in our living!

*Siblings united in Christ:  
Through the Sacrament of Baptism we are initiated into Christ's holy Church.  
We are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation  
and given new birth through water and the Spirit.  
All this is God's gift, offered to us without price.*

The importance of Acts 10 as a pivot point in church history and Christian theology is hard to underestimate. It is an old, old story of divine love shining through unexpected people. God's Spirit awakens Peter and leads him to break a religious rule and cultural taboo by entering the house of a gentile named Cornelius, a colonel in the occupying Roman army. Peter declares, "I really am learning that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to God. This is the message of peace God sent to the Israelites by proclaiming the good news through Jesus Christ: Christ is Lord of all!" Inclusion is the way of peace. We are not made less when unexpected folks show up at the altar, baptismal font, pulpit or marriage kneeler.

I love what the only bishop appointed by Jesus says, "I am learning." Would you repeat that with me? "I am learning." "I am learning" means God is still teaching. When did the Spirit stop working? We did not understand Wesley's warning that American slavery was the vilest evil on the face of the earth until a church split and civil war. It took us until 1956 to learn to ordain women. Only in 1972 did we learn that divorced pastors could serve! We still have much to learn about the wideness of God's grace offered to us without price! Learning or reason is a means of grace and a pillar of theology.

While still learning, Peter started speaking, but the Holy Spirit fell on everyone who heard the word and ended the sermon. Maybe someone is praying for that right now! The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were

astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. They heard them speaking in other languages and praising God. Peter asked, "These people have received the Holy Spirit just as we have. Surely no one can stop them from being baptized with water, can they?" He directed that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited Peter to stay for several days.

Why do we like exclusive brands of Christianity? Is it a kind of idolatry that values human works over divine grace? Do we fear that different folks will challenge our understanding of old rules? Was a kosher meal less holy because someone ate pulled pork at the same early church potluck? Are we afraid to learn something new? Do we worry that if God accepts someone else then our personal connection with Christ is less meaningful? Do we think God can't sort it all out? How could God calling someone else lessen my sense of call?

Last year, I read the scriptures and offered a prayer as two people invited God into the center of their life together. The wedding was orthodox and beautiful. I teared up with joy watching the persistent love of the two grooms, who overcame denominational obstacles, celebrate a Christian wedding. With a wooden cross made by a clergy friend, they turned a clubhouse into a chapel. God's love hallowed that space and their union. They went to extraordinary lengths to say 'yes' to God, to our broken church, and to each other in order to simply ask God's blessing upon their union. The two grooms made the same promises I shared with Connie in 1988. Their vows reminded me how God's love has upheld and refreshed our love across 31 years.

Could it be that we cluster up and exclude others because we focus too much on ourselves or on others, and not enough on the gift of God? Do we forget that *'All this is God's gift, offered to us without price'*?

Baptism, Holy Communion, the new birth, salvation, and heaven are not about us. Baptism is our foundation- and it is God's gift, not something we earn. All ministry flows from God's baptismal font! God's mighty acts of salvation do not run dry. Faith, hope, and love are not like cars, oil, or pizza. Unlike pizza, if we give away love, our love grows. If we extend love's community, a more loving community emerges. If in faith we stretch out, our faith enlarges. If we forgive, we find deeper forgiveness. Only generosity, makes us generous. Hospitality makes our hearts hospitable. Creative risks births creativity. Doing the beautiful creates beauty. Acceptance multiplies deeper self-acceptance. Peacemaking spreads deeper peace. The practices of spiritual living grow our spiritual muscles, and that deep muscle memory is there in the toughest times. Grace grows with use. This is God's gift, offered to us without price.

In this hard season, I keep coming back to a passage from Paul. Paul's prayer is maybe a message for this season. *God gave God's grace to me, the least of all God's people, to preach the good news about the immeasurable riches of Christ to the Gentiles.... God's purpose is now to show the many different varieties of God's wisdom through the church... This is why I kneel before the Creator.... I ask that God will strengthen you in your inner selves from the riches of God's glory through the Spirit. I pray that Christ will live in your hearts through faith, as a result of having strong roots in love. I pray that you'll*

*have the power to grasp love's width and length, height and depth, together with all believers, so that you'll know the love of Christ that is beyond knowledge and be filled entirely with the fullness of God. Glory to God, who is able to do far beyond all that we could ask or imagine by God's power at work within us..*

*Amen.* (from Ephesians 3)

Let us keep learning and leaning into God's grace. Let us strive to be deeply rooted in love, trusting that God is working on, and through others, who express faith with a different understanding than our own. But in all things let us remember our very lives are "*God's (good) gift, offered to us without price.*"

*Amen.*