

Be Astonished

I. That God forgave the world

II. That God forgives you

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak, ³⁶ 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. ³⁹We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹ He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

“Today’s service is only for those of you who are of Hispanic origin. The rest of you are not even supposed to be in here in the first place. You need to go and worship in the back room, separate from us.” What if you came to church next week and I began the service with that statement? Most, if not all of us, would have to leave. How would you feel? Discriminated against? You might go home and report me to the ACLU or mail me a copy of the Bill of Rights. Now you know how non-Jewish people felt in Jesus’ day.

In Jesus’ day, when King Herod renovated the temple in Jerusalem he added a wall that separated what was called *the Court of the Gentiles* from the rest of the structure. If you were a person of non-Jewish descent, called a Gentile, and had converted to Judaism, you were still not allowed into the same area of the temple where the Jews worshiped. Historians report that on the wall was posted a sign warning that any Gentile who passed beyond it into the Jewish court would be killed. Jews did not invite Gentiles into their home as guests nor did they eat with them. Jewish fathers did not give their daughters’ hand in marriage to Gentile men. Gentiles were considered unclean. Discrimination? Not exactly. By divine choice the LORD had selected the Hebrews as His nation. He promised that the Messiah would be born from this race. He wanted a pure Jewish nation. He did not want his people defiled by pagan worship practices. To keep his people focused on his promise of the Savior he established special laws and ceremonies for them. The Jewish people were to be separate from Gentile peoples.

This all changed after Jesus died and rose again. Our lesson this morning is from Acts 10, and actually begins at the start of the chapter with a man named Cornelius. Cornelius lived in the town of Caesarea which sat on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, about 50 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Scripture gives us these facts about Cornelius. He was a commander in the Roman army. He and his whole family were God-fearing people. Cornelius even gave generous offerings to anyone in need and prayed to God regularly.

One day the Lord sent an angel to Cornelius. This heavenly messenger told the commander that God had been listening to his prayers and was aware of his generous giving. The angel told Cornelius to send his servants to Joppa, a city about 30 miles south, and bring back a man named Peter. The commander immediately sent his personal attendant and two servants.

The next day in Joppa around noon, the apostle Peter was waiting for lunch to be prepared so he went up to the roof to wait. Remember in those days the roofs of homes were flat. While he waited he too had a vision. Heaven was opened and a large sheet was let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of animals. A voice told him, **“Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”** Peter replied, **“Surely not, Lord!”** The animals on the sheet were those which the Lord had commanded his people Israel not to eat, for they were unclean. The voice spoke to Peter, **“Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”** This happened three times and the sheet was taken back to heaven. While Peter wondered about the meaning of the vision, three men arrived at the home, asking if Peter lived there. The Holy Spirit told Peter, **“Three men are looking for you. Go with them. I have sent them.”** Peter went downstairs and invited the men in to stay the night. The next day Peter took some Jewish friends and began the trip to Caesarea with Cornelius’ servants.

When they stepped into Cornelius’ house, Peter and his companions immediately realized that they were out of their element. All their lives they had been taught that this situation was not right, to be in the same home with a crowd of non-Jewish people. But Peter did not begin his introductions by saying, “You guys are going to have to go in the other room and we’ll talk to you from there. Instead he said, **“You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean.”** Peter now realized the meaning of his vision. Cornelius then revealed his vision to Peter and told him they were all eager to hear what he had to say, since he was sent by God himself. Although Cornelius and his family and friends were Gentiles, they were Jews. They believed in God. They too were waiting for the LORD to send a Messiah who would save them from their sins. They had heard the stories about Jesus of Nazareth. But they did not know the details. More importantly, they did not know he had died and rose for them.

So Peter began his sermon, a very simple outline of the gospel (good news). God shows no favoritism but gives salvation to people from every nation. God gave salvation to all by sending his Son Jesus, who lived a holy, sin-free life, and fulfilled the requirements of the law. Jesus was crucified and died. Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus appeared to his disciples and friends. And Peter made sure he emphasized this point. These stories were not second-hand. He was an eye-witness. Jesus then told his disciples to share the message of Christ crucified and risen to all the world. Peter was about to continue his sermon but he had to stop. Scripture tells us that at that moment the Holy Spirit created saving faith in the hearts of the men, women and children in that room. Scriptures records that those who had traveled with Peter were astonished that the Holy Spirit had been poured out on these non-Jewish folks.

You see, the early Jewish Christians failed to understand that the gospel was for the Gentiles as well as for the Jews and that they too would share the benefits of salvation. They shouldn't have been astonished because the Holy Spirit worked the same way on their hearts. He uses the Word of God to create faith when and where and with whomever he wants to. It just happened that he chose this moment at this exact time. Peter then asked, "Why shouldn't these people be baptized in Jesus' name?" Why shouldn't these people also receive the washing away of sins through water and the word? Peter and his Jewish companions now saw that the kingdom of heaven was opened to all, not just Jews, but to Gentiles, too.

What is astonishing is that God would forgive anyone at all. Since the fall into sin all people, regardless of nationality or skin color, are born into this world separated from God. Sin separates all people from God. It does not allow them to accept him, believe in him, sin does not even allow anyone to have the desire to do so. In fact, sin creates in everyone a hatred of God and his Word. Sin creates in all people the opinion that living a good and decent life is enough to get them into heaven. Sin puts all people into that outer court separated from God's heavenly temple. What is astonishing is that Jesus himself said, "God so loved the world." He had no reason to do so, and yet he sent "his one and only Son." To do what? To break down the dividing wall of hostility that separates an angry, righteous God and unworthy, rebellious sinners. Christ did this by taking the sin of the world on himself. (Eph 2:14; 2Cor 5) Now heaven is open for all. The gift of heaven is given to all who believe in Jesus; all who trust that he is the One who took their sins on himself.

What's even more astonishing is that God sent his Holy Spirit to share this saving message with me and you. What is astonishing is that God does not discriminate against you and me, although we discriminate against each other. I'm sure that if you look back in your life there were times when you looked at someone who had a different skin color than you, spoke a different language, or dressed not the way you do and you treated them differently. Or maybe you discriminate against others because of the high opinion you have of yourself. At times we think we are better than others because of our education, our rank, our experiences in life, or maybe our age, whether young or old. It's astonishing that God doesn't discriminate against us when we do that very same thing to our brothers and sisters in Christ. When someone says or does something we do not like, or take offense at it, we treat them differently. We choose to ignore them or say things about them behind their back. It's astonishing that God would send his Holy Spirit to share his Word and tell me I'm forgiven, unclean as I am.

But what does forgiveness mean? You often hear people say, "Forgive and forget." Forgiveness is forgetting what someone did to you. But I've also often heard people say, "I can forgive, but I cannot forget." That's only another way of saying, "I will not forgive." Someone once said, "***Forgiveness ought to be like a canceled note--torn in two and burned up so that it never can be shown against one.***" What if you were God? Would you be able to erase the memory of every act and thought and word of disobedience that just one sinner would make in just one day? Now imagine the population of the entire world and all the offenses they commit against you in just one day. I think you would have to agree that this would be difficult. Yet what does the

Father say about his forgiveness of your sins? In Micah 7:18,19 the prophet says, **“Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives transgression? You do not stay angry forever, but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.”** God puts your sins out of his sight, out of his reach, out of his mind and out of existence. Your sins of discrimination, your unforgiving attitudes, your vain ideas of self worth; those transgressions died with Christ and were buried in the tomb with him. When Christ rose on Easter Sunday morning he left your sins behind him, and brought out with him a new life for you, a life of forgiveness.

He promises, **“That everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.** (vs43) Because you trust in him for forgiveness God hurls those sins into heart of sea. In the movie *Titanic*, the main character, Rose, was a survivor of the sinking ship. In the movie Rose is portrayed as much older, many years after the event. Deep sea explorers who had examined the wreckage knew that she could be the one who might possibly know where a precious jewel was. In the end Rose had the necklace around her neck the whole time. She stands at the edge of the boat and hurls that precious jewel into the depths of the sea, never to be found again by any deep sea explorers who might profit from it. It’s amazing that God does same with your sins, so that Satan might not find them, and profit by accusing you of past sins, dragging you down to the depths of hell. It’s amazing that on the Last Day you will stand before the throne of God and he will not see your long list of offenses. Instead he will see the cross on Calvary and the empty tomb, where his Son put away all your sins. And as he escorts you into heaven you will not be astonished. It is what he has promised you who believe in his Son’s death and resurrection.

When we enter the courts of heaven, we will not be surprised to see people from every race, nation, tribe and language. He has promised it.

This is why I am not astonished that you will go home today and thank your God that he sent someone like Peter to share the name of Jesus with you so that you might believe and have eternal life. I am not astonished that you will go home today and thank God that he has given Holy Baptism to give even our little children and infants the gift of faith so that they believe Jesus is their Savior.

This morning be astonished that God forgave you. Be astonished that he now tells you to share his message with every tribe, language and nation. Amen.