

Sermon, January 8, 2023
Acts 10:34-48

“Jesus of Nazareth Anointed with the Holy Spirit”

This morning’s reading begins with Jesus’ disciple, Peter, speaking with an assembled group of early Christians, and says, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality...”, which, at the time was rather groundbreaking. It speaks of a God who is not a tribal deity, or exclusive to a particular nation. The King James Version of the Bible does not use the word ‘partiality’, but says, “God is no respecter of persons... . In the past I have heard that interpreted as God has no respect for human beings, which certainly contradicts the idea of the God who is love. What it really means is that God’s love is not affected by a person’s station in life, or way of being. King or peasant, master or servant, rich or poor, male or female, gay or straight - regardless of nationality or ethnicity, God’s love remains the same.

In recent decades there has been talk of God’s “preferential option for the poor”, and it’s true that throughout the Bible God is heard coming to the defense of the poor and marginalized in society; but it is not meant to dehumanize the rich. It is a matter of justice, not a matter of divine love. It is not that God does not respect people, but , rather, insists upon the equality of all people. It is a sentiment echoed in Article 1 of the United Nation’s ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ , i.e., “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”. Unfortunately, it is human sinfulness that gets in the way of that realization.

Verse 45 says, “The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.” The circumcised refers to the fact that the earliest believers in Jesus were Jewish, as were Jesus and the disciples. This, again, points to the interconnectedness of all, but , in time, those same Gentiles would begin to turn on their Jewish counterparts, setting the stage for a form of anti-Semitism, that sadly is on the rise today.

Verse 34 continues, “...but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him”. Once, again, this points to the universality of God’s love, and as I have suggested in the past, to fear him means to hold God in awe, not to believe in a God who casts thunderbolts at wrongdoers. But, as is clear from the teachings of Jesus, God does want to lead us in the direction of that which is good, righteous, just and loving.

Peter goes on to speak of how John the Baptist announced that Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit. (The word , Christ actually means ‘anointed one’.) Then later on as Peter was speaking, the Holy Spirit “ fell upon all who heard the word” - the word meaning the gospel, that is, the Good News, which is the lordship of Jesus Christ, and the forgiveness of sin.

Along with the anointing of the Spirit comes empowerment to do that which is good, which extends to all who are anointed by the Spirit. Now there has always been argument as to when such anointing takes place. Some see it as something separate from water baptism, while others see it as taking place at the same time as water baptism . For me it seems that it takes place whenever our hearts and minds are open to the infilling of the Spirit and the desire to do the will of God, that is, to do that which is good, righteous, just , and loving.

Verse 38 continues on to say that Jesus was “healing all who were oppressed by the devil”. The idea of a being called the devil, Satan, or Lucifer , was never a belief among the early Jews. They picked it up from Persian religion during their Babylonian captivity. And in the time of Jesus, with no knowledge of germs, bacteria, viruses, etc. , illness and maladies, both physical and mental, were usually attributed to the devil or demonic possession, with healing having to do with the casting out of such demonic forces.

In my personal opinion, the devil is an outdated idea that is too often used to excuse our own sinful behavior, meaning, as Flip Wilson used to say, “The devil made me do it!”. We have to be accountable for our own behavior, and not scapegoat a mythological figure called the devil! And, of course, recognize that healing today comes about with a combination of proper medical care and faith.

Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom of God is within us, which points to the possibility of a better world, especially if we are open to God’s Holy Spirit , who inspires and empowers us to fight the good fight, making the better world a reality! Amen.

Let us pray: O God, we are made glad by the good news of your love for us and for all. We thank you for creating us and all that is necessary for life. We thank you for your action in Christ by which our lives are measured, found wanting, and renewed. Help us to remember your gifts that we may praise you with our lives of joy and service; through Jesus Christ...Amen.