"Preaching and Teaching" Acts 10:34-44 & Romans 1:8-17

What gives any preacher the right to stand up at least once a week in the middle of a service of worship and claim to speak on behalf of God? Let me tell you. **We preachers do not draw our authority from superior knowledge, or political power, or rhetorical flourish. We are given authority from God alone to proclaim what God has already spoken through his Word.** In 2nd Timothy 4:2 Paul told his young disciple Timothy, a pastor in Ephesus to *"Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season."* We preachers don't have any authority if we're reviewing the latest Netflix series. We don't have any authority if you ask us for a restaurant recommendation. We don't have any authority if we're sharing thoughts about a conspiracy theory on social media. We might make some worthwhile or interesting points. We might have some good advice for perhaps finding a job. But we preachers are given special authority to speak on God's behalf when we are preaching God's Word.

In the end, preaching isn't just about transmitting information. If that was the only goal, then preaching would no longer be the most efficient means to do so. We could move on to videos, podcasts, or even just books, and cut out the time in worship altogether. Yet hearing a sermon isn't just about you and your personal walk with Jesus. It's also about shaping a heavenly culture and building a heavenly city here in our own church. **It's about shaping our life together**.

In our first Scripture reading today, Peter has a spiritual breakthrough that impacts the life of the whole church. It's a story of two visions. One vision came to Peter after he fell into a trance (10:10). In the other vision an angel came openly to a Roman military man named Cornelius (10:3). **The story begins back in the first verse of chapter 10 with Cornelius, a Roman centurion.** Apparently this Roman was a sincere God-seeker even though he was not a Jew. We assume that he either had no official religious preference or that he followed the Roman gods. But he was obviously interested in the stories about Jesus, and he was generous to the poor. About three o'clock in the

afternoon, he suddenly saw an angel standing before him in dazzling white. The angel called him by name and told him that God recognized his *"prayers and gifts to the poor."* I see this as notable proof that God hears the prayers of people who are not Christian—and not even Jewish. Then the angel instructed Cornelius to send men to Joppa to find Peter who was staying with a tanner whose house was by the sea at Joppa.

Cornelius' vision has no ambiguity, and it occurs in the full light of day. Cornelius has no trouble understanding its meaning. He simply has to do what the angel instructs. So, Cornelius promptly sends three men to find Peter. The second vision occurs while the men are on their way to Joppa. Peter goes up on the roof to pray and becomes hungry. While the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. In this state of semi-consciousness, he saw a vision of the heavens opening and something like a large sheet coming down. In it were all kinds of animals that were considered unclean by the ancient practices of the Jewish people. Then he heard a voice saying, *"Get up, Peter. Kill and eat"* (10:13). Peter immediately responds, *"Surely not, Lord. I have never eaten anything impure or unclean"* (10:14). Then the voice said, *"Do not call anything impure that God has made clean"* (10:15).

Do you see an interesting bit of irony in these stories as I do? Immediately Cornelius knew what his vision meant and promptly obeyed. **But Peter, even though the vision was repeated *three times* for emphasis, only slowly came to understand what God was saying to him.** Verse 17 says, *"Now while Peter was very perplexed in himself what the vision which he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood before the gate."* The Spirit instructed Peter to go with them, and he followed them back to Caesarea.

Upon arrival at Cornelius' house, Peter found the house full of relatives and guests who also feared God and were eager to hear God's word from Peter. Peter explains to these Gentiles that as a Jew he wasn't supposed to be there. In the process Peter realizes the correlation between his experience and

his food vision. He concludes in v. 35 that *"God accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right."* **Up to that time, the Good News of Jesus had been preached only to the Jews.** But Peter now understands that this was no longer the case. **He goes on to tell them about Jesus Christ:** *"You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all"* (v. 36). With this incredible statement, Peter's preaching in the power of the Spirit makes a breakthrough.

With excitement in his voice, the Apostle teaches a brief synopsis of the story of the Jesus **and he intentionally says that Jesus is Lord of all!** While Peter was still preaching, the Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentiles and they began speaking in tongues! All the Jewish believers were amazed at this proof that the Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit. What is truly striking about today's Scripture is the way in which Peter himself comes to believe in God's impartiality and universality. It is a theme that is picked up by many other New Testament writers. If we really understood the ways of God, we might find dramatic changes in our behavior. One pastor said it this way:

- Instead of being so quick to judge and condemn others, both inside and outside the church, **we would** be even quicker to forgive, understand, and care for one another.
- Instead of choosing issues, dividing into opposing camps and waging war against one another, **we would** seek the wisdom of Scripture, welcome the insight of the Holy Spirit, and trust that Christ has enough love to go around.
- Instead of coming with our own agendas, **we would** come together with the agenda of Jesus.
- Instead of talking about others, **we would** talk with them.
- Instead of assuming that we know 'what Jesus would do,' **we would** get to know Jesus.
- Instead of imitating the culture of hatred, envy, violence, exclusion, and judgmentalism that is running rampant in the world today, **we would** imitate our gracious and loving God.

- Then, and only then, will we be ready to go forth and serve in Christ's name.
- Then, and only then, will the power of the Holy Spirit fill us to overflowing.
- Then, and only then, will God's great love and grace be seen in our lives.

It's always worth paying close attention to the opening few paragraphs of any book of the Bible. For instance, in our second reading today we find a summary of what Paul wants to say, *"to all in Rome who are loved and called by God,"* and we find a reason for his letter. What we find in verses 8-13 is that we discover this letter is written for a particular occasion. We also see that Paul has a more general purpose of clarifying the nature of the good news of the gospel. But the first reason for writing is because the Apostle is hoping to come and visit them. He's preparing the groundwork for a possible visit, because later in the letter we find out he plans on traveling to Spain.

In the first few verses of our passage Paul writes: *"First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.* ***God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times…"*** Then Paul's motivation for writing is revealed because he tells us all about it in verses 14 &15: *"I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish.* ***That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome****."*

Paul makes clear that his primary motivation is to preach the gospel!! He says **he is not ashamed of the gospel** in the next verse. Why? Because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith. I guess being unsure of whether it's OK to preach the gospel to people isn't a new phenomenon. In Paul's day preaching the gospel would have been in the context of a multitude of "gods" that people would have made offerings to on a regular basis, perhaps even daily. Of course, Christians were more of a minority then than they are today, not to mention that they were also generally speaking poor and without

much social status. So, to preach the gospel, to tell people that there's only one true and living God, the one they worshipped, no doubt sounded just as presumptuous and perhaps arrogant as it sometimes sounds today, or at least as it's often portrayed.

But, he says, he's not ashamed of preaching a gospel that's unique or makes exclusive claims on people. The truth is this gospel holds the answer to our greatest dilemma. It holds the power of God to bring salvation to everyone who has faith in him through Christ Jesus. People throughout history have been seeking ways of being right with God, of knowing that beyond this world was another where we might enjoy the presence of God forever. You think about the multitude of religious systems that have arisen in the history of the world and what you find in almost every case is people trying to placate God or gain God's blessing or find a way to enjoy eternal bliss when this life is over. But the reality is that we've never been able to do it. Paul is about to show how badly we've failed. Even the Jews who were given special insight by God into the way he wanted them to live were unable to do it. Yet here in the gospel we find a power that no one even dreamed was possible: the power to be made right with God. The power to be saved from ourselves, if you like. **And all that's needed for that to happen is to put our faith in Jesus Christ.**

Dr. George Carson at First Presbyterian Church, Beaver Falls was one of my mentors after I was ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. George told a group of us rookie pastors around the lunch table that Sunday mornings won't be the only opportunity we have **to preach**. He said every funeral service is an opportunity to tell the good news of Jesus. I took George's counsel to heart. **At practically every funeral service since then, I say,** "None of us go to heaven because we have been good enough or because we have gone to church a required number of times. **We go to heaven because Christ died on the cross for us**—because Jesus made atonement for our sin. For each of us a time is coming when we will step from this lifetime into time eternal. Spending eternity with God is the difference that faith makes." **I can say that because I have it on good authority—the authority of God and his Word. Amen.**