



Pastor Ken's Sermon

SERMON – 6TH EASTER

ACTS 10:34-48

MAY 9, 2021

“WHAT’S THAT YOU SAY?”

Our lesson from Acts is a conversion story. I think it can be said however that Lutherans are a little uneasy with conversion stories. We're glad when they happen but not so sure we want to be around for them! The Lutheran Church – rightfully I believe, attributes faith to the work of the Holy Spirit. The foundational document of our tradition – the Augsburg Confession of 1530 states *“that we may obtain (faith), the Ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted, for through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, who works faith where and when it pleases God in they that hear the Gospel.”*

Translation – come to church and get saved. Regarding the 3rd Article of the Creed about the Holy Spirit, Luther's Small Catechism says *“I believe I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him...but the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel...”* Pair these two statements with a general human disinclination to talk about matters of religion, and you have the recipe for the “Great Commission” becoming instead a “Nice Suggestion”. I believe both confessional statements are true – faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit, for as Romans 10:17 says *“Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.”*

Peter spoke the word of Christ to a Roman named Cornelius who, through the work of the Holy Spirit, believed it. But are two works of the Spirit involved in conversion. In our story the first work of the Holy Spirit was to awaken in Cornelius an eager desire to hear the gospel. So far so good. The second work of the Spirit was getting Peter to go and speak it to Cornelius. That was done with no little skepticism on Peter's part – evident in his statement *“now I realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism.”* Peter didn't think the gospel the sort of thing a man like Cornelius would be interested in.

Our tradition places great emphasis on the gospel preached and sacraments administered in bringing to and sustaining people in faith. I do not quarrel with that. But that is what we do here for the most part. The problem is that in the last 25 years, the number of Christians who attend a worship service weekly has fallen from 68% to 40%. *Faith comes from what is heard...including the faith to evangelize.* Today over 50% of Christians believe it is the job of the local church to evangelize, a four-fold increase from 25 years ago. That's the modern Christian conundrum - Christians aren't *“hearing the word as much”* in church, while at the same time they say the local church should evangelize.

Add to that our culture's religious relativism. 91% of Americans believe the best way to find yourself is to look within yourself and 60% believe it is “extreme” (read extremely wrong) to attempt to convert someone to your faith. What then shall we do...or more to the point what can we say? Well, it seems to me a matter of first importance we turn to our wonderful tradition and believe in the grace of the Lord Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit to create faith – the faith that gives us the assurance of forgiveness AND the faith to witness. Both are evident in our lesson from Acts – God's spirit at work in hearer and speaker. That's crucial to recognize, otherwise witness is paralyzed. It becomes to large of a burden on us and strangles our conversations because we think the onus is all on us.

So, what to do? First, as I did a few weeks ago, I ask you to do a little homework. Write down what you'd say if someone were to ask you about your faith. These could include *"who is Jesus...how do I obtain the forgiveness of sins...what is prayer and why do it."* But also take a moment and write down your faith story – how did you come to know Jesus? Because while Peter clearly came and "preached the gospel" - I for a minute don't think he left it at that. The gospel folks who might also want to hear THE gospel want to hear first, is your faith story – why is Jesus good news to you?

Witnessing can be about you. It has to be about life. Use phrases like *"I have felt"* or *"I'm sure that was difficult for you"*, or *"I too have wondered..."* If your conversation partner is receptive...then bring Jesus into the conversation, saying something like *"my faith helped me"* or *"Jesus gave me clarity on."* Connect your story with God's story...and someone may want to see theirs the same way.

I'll pause here, because witnessing is often, unfortunately compared to sales – the emphasis is on closing the deal...ringing the register. But if faith comes from what is heard when Jesus is heard...Jesus acts – that's what Acts is about. We've got to believe that. You may get no further with someone than building trust and one time relating your faith to your life. If you get to the stage about actual questions of the faith...then call me! NOT!!! Turn to your little piece of paper...or a dog-eared page in a devotion book or even your Bible.

You won't probably have a good answer to questions like *"why does God permit suffering"* or *"how could a God of love permit something like hell"* or *"does God answer the prayers of all people."* I don't either. Doctrine is not the point at this point. Relaying to someone why despite it all or despite your own questions you trust Jesus would be "the gospel" to someone...so preach that! I Peter 3:15-16 says *"If someone asks you about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way."* We tend to take that verse and focus on the word "explain" – when we ought to focus on sharing the reason for our hope. Information is not so hard to come by these days...hope is in far shorter supply than we care to imagine.

Share how, for reasons that you cannot adequately explain, Jesus said to his first witnesses... doubters like Thomas...deniers like Peter...the lot of whom all fled when the going got tough... *"you did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last."* Share that as the source of your hope...and let Jesus take it from there. AMEN