

SERMON MAY 5 2024 Acts 10:34-48 “The Circle of Love.”  
*Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice!* (LSB #556)

Alleluia! Christ is risen! Dear fellow redeemed of the Risen Lord Christ, in our text from Acts, we read, **So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”**

Yet, our world is filled with partiality, favoritism, and division. In Peter’s day, it was Jew / Gentile. Today we see divisions between Heterosexual/homosexual, pro-choice/pro-life, republican / democrat, black / white, just to name a few.

We make distinctions all the time, so we tend to look at people as different from us. *But God does not.*

God shows no partiality because, in God’s eyes, no matter what side of those divisions you’re on, we have one universal common denominator: we’re all sinners; we all deserve nothing from Him but condemnation. In that way, we’re all equal.

Whatever you have and whatever talents you possess are gifts from your God, who gave them to you not because you deserved them but because He loves you.

He loves all people. And He wants all to be His children. Us and them.

And so God sent His child to love and befriend us so that we may be **His friends** who love Him and each other in return.

No matter who you are, no matter who they are.

Love is clearly the focus of the readings today. The word love is used five times in the Epistle and nine times in the Gospel.

So, if you're going to take one thing away from today's readings, remember Jesus said: **“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.**

That sounds simple, doesn't it? But it's not quite that simple for two reasons. First, we need to know what love is. Second, how can we love in a world as divided as ours?

I'll tackle the second one first: ***how can we love our neighbors in a world as divided as ours?***

John gave us the answer in the Epistle: **this is the victory that has overcome the world**—with its divisions, partiality, and favoritism - **our faith.**

It's not the size of our faith that makes a difference. One day, our faith is strong, and the next day, it's weak and frightened.

No, our faith overcomes the world because the object our faith is great. Jesus overcame the world and its ruler - Satan.

By His death and resurrection, Jesus has provided us with everything we need for both this life and the next.

There is nothing we need that He hasn't promised to provide and nothing He has promised that He won't deliver.

The problem is that *we don't believe it*. We say we do, we try to, but the evidence shows otherwise. And the evidence that we don't is that we keep on sinning.

We take from our neighbors because we don't trust God to provide.

We hurt others because we don't trust Him to protect us.

We rebel because we don't trust the authorities God has placed over us.

We take matters into our own hands because we think we can do better.

But the God who loves us provides for us even in our sins, granting us the forgiveness we need and strengthening our faith in Christ and His promises so we can trust and believe.

When God calls you His friend, His child, He does not take that lightly. Those aren't just words.

Jesus laid down His life for you and traded places with you to make it so. John tells us that the Spirit, the water, and the blood testify to this truth.

And so, in the first reading from Acts, the **Spirit** testified as it came upon the Gentiles as Peter preached to them.

Through the Words Peter proclaimed, the Spirit testified that, yes, these Gentiles were God's children.

Then, the water testified as Peter baptized them in the Name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus had commanded Peter and the others to baptize **all nations** in His Name. They were to show no partiality or favoritism or distinction.

Jesus sent Peter specifically to the Gentile Cornelius and his family to show just this - and to testify that His **blood**, shed on the cross, was for all people.

There is no one on earth for whom Jesus did not lay down His life. No one. And so the victory of Christ that is ours by faith enables us to love all people.

To continue the Gospel we heard last week, Jesus is the vine, **and we are the branches**. Connected to Him and abiding in Him, He abides in us and gives us His love—His love without partiality, or favoritism—that we may show others that love.

PAUSE

This leads to the second point: ***to love others, we need to know what love is.*** The world thinks or claims it knows what love is. But does it?

Jesus showed us what love is when He laid down His life for the life of the world. He showed us a love that wasn't a feeling but an action that does what is best for the object of its love.

God spelled out specifically what loving others looks like in the second table of the Ten Commandments. We are to practice them toward both those who agree with us and those who do not.

Because agape love, Godly love, doesn't show favoritism. Love just acts. Like Jesus did. Laying down His life for sinners, for criminals, for messed up folks like you and me.

Not to make us servants or force us into labor or service to Him, but to make us His friends and His children who are united by and connected to Christ.

To do so, Jesus was no weak and wimpy pushover. Jesus loved enough not only to speak the truth but to do love - even to those who didn't love Him - all the way to the cross.

Now the real question is: ***what will love look like for you and me?*** That's always where doctrine gets tough. As long as it's just theory, it's easy. When it gets real and practical, it's tough.

So, let's frame that love in terms of some very hot-button issues in our world today: We will speak and not stop speaking the truth that God created man and woman, that these are the only two genders there are, and that when a man and a woman are united as one flesh, that is a marriage.

We will speak and not stop speaking the truth that God created life and loves life - *all life* - no matter how small or weak or

disabled, no matter who you are, and that for us to kill or otherwise dispose of *any* life is contrary to His will.

We will speak and not stop speaking the truth that Jesus is the one and only Savior from sin, that He is the one and only Son of God made man, and that there is salvation in no one but Him.

We will speak and not stop speaking these truths (and others) because doing so is the loving thing to do.

But, for teaching these truths, we will be - called unloving, bigoted, hateful, and not welcomed in society.

For proclaiming these truths, Christians are being targeted, persecuted, and killed.

Perhaps the day is not so far away when folks will show up outside of our church and picket us, or worse.

So, *how will we respond?* Will we give in and change what we believe and teach? Will we fight back with equal and opposite violence and force?

Or will we continue to love? Both in words and actions.

Imagine if we did. While continuing to speak the truth, we would give food and water to those picketing us. It would take a lot of strength and love to do those things!

But what message would it send? What love would it show? Would some ridicule us?

Would some take advantage of us? Certainly.

But would others also notice such faith and love, hear of Jesus's truth, and be brought to faith?

While we might be ridiculed for standing up for the absolute truth of Scripture, realize how Christ-like all those actions are, for the One who loved was rejected and crucified.

And so the Spirit, the water, and the blood still testify today. The **Spirit** has come upon us and lives within us, testifying to the love of Christ for all people and helping us do that love.

The **water** testifying as all nations are baptized into Jesus - who still wants *all* to be His friends, His children.

The blood testifies for the Body and Blood of Jesus are given to us for the forgiveness of our sins, including the favoritism and partiality we show, for our lack of love and failure to trust.

For when we come up here and stand here at the altar, there are no distinctions or divisions; it is as equals - no matter who you are - equally sinful beggars and equally unworthy receivers.

But the Spirit, the water, and the blood testify that there is no sin too great, no sinner too far gone. There is no condemnation in Jesus, only outside of Him.

And He invites us to abide in Him and His truth - to repent and receive His forgiveness and His life and live it. To love even those who wish us dead, like they wanted Jesus dead.

And they did it. They killed Him. And now risen from the dead, He lives to forgive us and all. That we rise from sin, rise from death, and live with Him, in love, even now.

So as we sang: ***Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice!***

Rejoice, for you have been so loved, you have been so mercies; you have been thus raised to a new life in Christ.

For Christ is risen! [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*] And you are His - His friend, His child.

So ***love one another***, and don't worry about yourself. For with His love, you can never out-love, out-give, or out-care what God has done for you. **AMEN**