

Acts 11:1-18

Revelation 21:1-6

John 13:31-35

Psalm 148

SERMON

What Jesus is offering is a message of loving inclusion. At supper with his disciples he says, 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

And it's not just a meagre message of loving inclusion, it's a big one. It's not just a reminder to make sure you've invited everyone to the party. It's a reminder that not only do we invite everyone to the party, just as we have been invited, But also, that we demonstrate love to everyone at the party, just as we have been loved.

We concern ourselves with their comfort, we make sure that they are fed. There really is no ambiguity of this message in Jesus' ministry. Jesus lives and dies in the service of others.

And the really important bit about this is that he not only does this because this is his God given task. But also, ALSO because he has been sent by God to show us how to do this as well. He is incarnate so that God might show us how to love one another. To demonstrate in real time how to love one another.

It wasn't any easier to love one another in Jesus' time than it is now. This message is not some cozy relic of a nostalgic past. This message that has been, is now and always will be.

This week I was sequestered to a 2.5-day Clergy Retreat. Each year, we strand all clergy of Oregon together out in Silverton for several days. We listen to speakers, discuss relevant topics, argue theology, eat a lot of food and play ridiculously silly games. Those who survive go home to their parishes. One of the first evening icebreakers (a long-standing tradition) is to ask a question and depending on your answer you have to run to one side of the conference hall or the other. The extraverts love this game. The introverts are plastered to the walls or hiding in the corners, pretending to play.

One of the first questions was if you could, would you travel back into the past or would you travel into the future? And we were supposed to pick how many decades we wanted to go. Many people ran to the past, and I thought I've been there or seen it and it was all that great. And for some people it REALLY was not so great.

So, I ran to the future. And I explained that I was going way ahead, decades ahead. Like in Star Trek time. Maybe because I did this when I said that they all took one step back from me. Or perhaps it was because I said I want to go ahead when the universe is at peace and people know how to love one another- a time when Romulans and Klingons are no longer our enemies. Now if you do not know what I am talking about, bless you because I did not make friends with the comment.

I long for a time when we have learned to love one another, not despite our differences but because of them.

One of the discussion themes at this year's clergy conference was the topic of Fear. But interestingly the direction of the discussion was to examine Fear as a Virtue. Now most of us can understand how Fear can be a virtue, or at least a helpful attribute. Because we understand that Fear can keep us alive. We might choose not to walk down dark alleys alone or play with sticks of dynamite for fear that harm will come to us. All good uses of the fear instinct.

But what about when Fear gets muddy? What happens when God speaks to us and what we hear makes us afraid? When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, we can feel uncomfortable. When Jesus tells us to love our enemies, some of what we feel is fear.

In the story from the Books of Acts Peter is explaining to his critics why he is bringing the Good News to the Gentiles. They want to know why he has strayed outside the boundaries of where this message was meant to stay. Why is he loving his enemies? Peter is not only evangelizing but he is openly fraternizing with non-Jews. He is sharing meals with non-Jews and given the dietary laws of his Jewish faith this is a problem.

So, he tells his critics that he has seen a vision. And in this vision, and I summarize here, he is told that nothing that comes from God is profane or unclean. And to make such divisions of what is profane or unclean whether it be food, or the people who see these rules differently is not worthy of the followers of Jesus. Peter then states that the Spirit told him to go to the home of Gentiles and baptize them with the Holy Spirit, To make no distinction between those who will receive the blessing of God.

Peter states ' If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"

His critics are silenced by this story. And then praising God, they say, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

This is a model story of, personal spiritual awakening, hospitality and loving inclusion. Was Peter a little afraid of this message? Probably, it not only broke the religious norms, but it also put his life in danger.

It is a clear and decisive edict to break down the barriers that protect exclusivity. This is a statement from God that reminds us that the Good News is not ours to hold hostage, to mete out to only those who measure up by our personal standards or those of some particular worship community.

Worship communities are all a little different. If you've attended different churches, you know that. It's not just between different denominations, but even between the different Episcopal Church there are differences. We tend to migrate to where we are comfortable. And for the most part that's okay. Really okay.

The challenge that we have to keep in mind, and I think this cautionary statement is all over the scripture passages today, is that within a system of choosing and designing worship communities they can begin to close in on themselves.

What makes the church community unique, if communities are not careful, can become a barrier. And over time the barrier can become less permeable. When the persona of the church community begins to identify with its own image more strongly than that of the Jesus ministry, there is a problem.

As disciples of Jesus, we seek wisdom in the scriptures and courage from stories of the early disciples. By God's Grace, and Jesus' model of abundant love, we bravely walk forward on the path where we and all are welcome.

Amen