

Sermon & Prayers for May 15, 2022
The Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C
Bishop Bill Gafkjen, Indiana-Kentucky Synod, ELCA

Prayer of the Day

O Lord God, you teach us that without love, our actions gain nothing. Pour into our hearts your most excellent gift of love that, made alive by your spirit, we may know goodness and peace. Through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

Acts 11:1-18

In defense of his earlier baptism of non-Jewish believers, Peter demonstrates to the members of the Jerusalem church that God's intention to love Gentiles as well as Jews is revealed in Jesus' testimony. In this way the mission to the Gentiles is officially authorized.

¹Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” ⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵“I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ ¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷If 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?” ¹⁸When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

John 13:31-35

After washing the disciples' feet, predicting his betrayal, and then revealing his betrayer, Jesus speaks of his glorification on the cross. This deep complicated love of Jesus, even to death on the cross, will be the distinctive mark of Jesus' community.

³¹When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ ³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours in abundance, dear people of God, from God our creator, through the Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I can't help but wonder if this Peter we read about in the reading from Acts is the same Peter that we read about in the gospel stories.

After all, Peter in the gospels jumped out of the boat and walked across the water the moment Jesus told him to do it. But now here, three times Peter refuses to do what he clearly understands to be the voice of God telling him to do. "Kill and eat, Peter." "Nope, nothing unclean has ever entered my mouth." "Peter don't call profane what I have made clean." "Nope, still not going to do it."

Three times Peter refuses, until some messengers come to call him beyond the boundaries that he was trapped in, beyond the tradition that had been so meaningful to him and to so many others for so many centuries. Visitors come knocking at his door to call him to a new place, to uncharted territory, with people that he had believed could not be a part of the kingdom of God.

Yes, it is the same Peter, but sometime between that moment of jumping out of the boat to impulsively to go toward Jesus and follow him and now something has calcified in Peter, something that seems like relying on something other than the Word of God – Jesus – to make his decisions... things like longstanding tradition or practices that he believed and many others believed were right and good. Peter is called beyond himself, beyond what is familiar, even beyond what has been meaningful and good for him, in order to be a part of a new thing that God was doing.

Thankfully, eventually he obeyed. He gave up his need to be pure in order to go where God was calling him, at risk of being made dirty. And in the process, Peter and those he met in Caesarea testified to the wide, ever-widening embrace of the crucified and risen Christ that burst from the tomb of limited expectations, from captivity to the relentless and ultimately futile pursuit of keeping oneself pure. Peter was invited into a transformed community, diverse and deep, broad and beautiful.

Dear siblings in Christ, Jesus comes to us these days in many and various ways, sometimes through visions, sometimes through spoken or read Word of God, sometimes in the quiet of our hearts, inviting us to trust the forgiveness that he has given to us and to follow him beyond the bounds, beyond the bonds, of like-minded, like-skinned, like-believing, like-voting, like-living pseudo-community toward what one theologian has called “the radically transformed sense of the kind of community that is possible in God's new realm made possible by Jesus crucified and risen.”

This is the repentance that leads to life that the author of Acts says was given to the people in Caesarea and was given to Peter: turning away from reliance on what we know and are comfortable with and allowing the Spirit to bring us to unknown places and people to share good news and to receive their gifts in new ways. It's what compelled Peter, this gift of repentance that leads to life. It's what compelled him and his companions to let go of a lifetime of assumptions about who's in and who's out, to let go of the accompanying limited imagination about the breadth of God's reign and God's reach, and to let go of preconceptions about what it means to be a faithful person and to be a part of a faithful community.

This repentance opens us to becoming part of a community that requires the crossing of boundaries and walking across bridges that divide. This repentance moves us to let go of assumptions about the way things are supposed to be and welcome the way things are in God's grace.

Like Peter and his companions, we too are called to follow Jesus beyond the certainty of what we think is true and good and has been meaningful for us toward the uncertainty of what might be – of the new things that emerge in the reign of God made manifest in the crucified and risen One.

We like, Peter and the people in Caesarea, are invited into a new vision of what it means to be a part of God's kingdom in Christ and how we are to be church. One theologian, Gary Charles,ⁱ says that "Surely the church should read each of these visions (that of Peter's and that of the person in Caesarea) with caution. Taking these visions from God seriously could shake the church from trying to hinder the movement of God by its obsession with what has always been and open it up to celebrate what it can become in the power of the Holy Spirit."

Who have we kept at a distance from us in our quest for preserving tradition or staying pure in theology or thought or political persuasion or moral commitment? Who have we kept at a distance as "them" not "us" that God may be calling us to make no more distinction? To what Caesarea might God be sending you, where people are waiting to welcome you, and whole communities craving to be a part of the one body of Christ?

This is also a call to new vision about who we are and how we live as church. Gary Charles also asks: "Is there a vision of the future of the church that you know that you would be afraid to see? Is there a vision that you have already had that you've been avoiding?" What might the power of the Holy Spirit be calling you or your congregation to open itself to in this Easter season as people of the resurrection? How are you, how are we, being called and sent to love as we have been loved by Jesus?

The kind of love that Jesus demonstrated, and that Jesus calls us to follow, is the kind of love that Jesus has shown to his first followers and, through them, has shown to us. It's the radical hospitality toward and welcoming of those who have been excluded or demeaned or diminished. It's the washing of others' feet, even those who will betray in some way.

This is unconditional love, generous love. It's the love that has become ours in the washing of water and Word. It is etched on our brows and sealed in our hearts. It's love that forgives over and over and over again from abundant and irrepressible grace. It's self-giving love that lets go of assumptions about who's in and who's out, lets go of truncated imagination about what is possible in the reign of God, and steps out of the boat to walk toward God's promised and preferred, if unfamiliar, future. It's the love that stretches out its arms on a cross in surrender to the new-world-making power of love far beyond our imagination or control and rises from the tomb to make it so.

As for Peter and for our ancestors in faith in ancient Caesarea, may God give us the repentance that leads to life as we ponder anew what the Almighty can do and step out of our carefully crafted and comfortable boats to love as we have been loved, and to live together into God's beautiful reign.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers

Set free from captivity to sin and death, we pray to the God of resurrection for the church, people in need, and all of creation.

A brief silence.

Loving God, lead us to follow your Spirit, rather than our own prejudices or desires, as the church cares for one another. Open us to perceive your gifts in those we least expect. God, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Inspire us to praise you through the beauty and majesty of the natural world around us (*local natural areas may be named*). Urge us toward more deliberate care of the world you have made. God, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Humble the rulers of nations before your splendor. Direct them to the people who need their attention most, and turn them from the temptation to hoard wealth or power. God, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Hasten to dwell among those who are in pain or distress (*especially*). As Christ enters our deepest suffering, remain with those experiencing despair and great need. God, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Place holy love at the center of all our relationships and communities. By your love heal us, convict us, and renew us. Bring an end to racism in our churches and communities. Let everyone know your goodness by the love we show one another. God, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Here other intercessions may be offered.

Give us a place in the diverse company of your beloved saints. Teach us the value of each person's identity, and bless us with a shared identity as your children, kindred of Christ. God, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

In your mercy, O God, respond to these prayers, and renew us by your life-giving Spirit; through Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Amen.

Prayers, including the Prayer of the Day, adapted from [SundaysandSeasons.com](https://www.sundaysandseasons.com).

ⁱ As quoted in **Everyday Connections: Reflections and Practices for Year C** © 2021 Westminster John Knox Press, p. 262.