

May 19, 2019 Fifth Sunday of Easter
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Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas

GOSPEL

John 13:31-35

The holy gospel according to Saint John, the thirteenth chapter.
Glory to you, O Lord.

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.”

The gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.

Today, in John, we hear Jesus’ final commandment to his disciples...
to love one another...
He calls it a new commandment...though it is also very old.
But it is about to be important in a new way.
It is interesting that we read this passage today...
because we heard it so recently, in worship on Maundy Thursday,
just a few days before Easter morning....just over a month ago.

But there are some things that bear repeating, aren’t there?
In fact, there are things that require it.

Just this week, at our house, we have been repeating over and over...
in writing...and out loud...
what is the difference between the number six and the number nine.
There are very few things we truly learn without repetition,
even the ones that we eventually take for granted.

The command to live out of love...

so much that we would be known by love...

that it would make us recognizable...

is one of those things, no doubt, that needs repeating.

If we went out to HEB, or the YMCA, or the Alamo Drafthouse today...

and asked what Jesus' followers are like...how people recognize them...

I'm not sure how often "love" is the answer we would get.

Jesus showed us with his life and his teachings

that the kingdom looks like always widening the welcome...

adding a place to the table...

caring for those who are silenced or excluded...

and resisting everything unloving and unjust.

Love one another. Some things bear repeating.

Repetition also underscores the message in the book of Acts today...

and though it may feel a bit more distant from our lives...it really isn't.

When I first began preparing for worship today,

I read this text from Acts 11 and thought to myself,

"Huh. I didn't remember this story being told from Peter's perspective."

I remembered that it happened to Peter...

but not that he was the one telling the story.

And when I expanded my focus to the surrounding chapters,

I realized why I was confused.

I was confused because this story *is* told *about* Peter and not *by* Peter
in the chapter just before...

almost the exact same story (at least the part from Peter's point of view).

If we read chapter 10 and 11,

we hear twice in a row about Peter's strange vision

of a sheet full of unclean animals

and the voice that says to "kill and eat" three different times.

We hear him tell how it helped him understand

that he needed to go to the home of the Gentile, Cornelius,

and not treat him any differently than a Jewish follower of Jesus.

This is a lesson that bears repeating.

If we read from the very beginning of chapter 10,
there is also something important that has happened
that Peter doesn't know yet when he has his vision.
We hear about how Cornelius and his household are faithful to God
and that a messenger of God has appeared to them to send them to Peter...
to connect them to the community.
The true action of the story begins beyond the borders
where people would be looking...
outside of where God is expected to show up.

Peter's vision is a preparation.
God teaches Peter that the line between clean and unclean
and Jew and Gentile aren't of ultimate concern to God.
God teaches Peter to be ready for a new thing...
for God to be active in unexpected places and people
(not that this should be a surprise by now...
though somehow it always is)...
And because Peter has this vision and witnesses the faith
and the presence of the Holy Spirit in Cornelius's family,
he baptizes them all...and stays with them for a number of days.

Some things do bear repeating.
And the author of Acts thought that this moment
in the journey of the people of the Way...the followers of Jesus...
mattered enough that people needed to hear it twice.

The followers of Jesus in Jerusalem certainly did.
The reason Peter tells the story is to explain himself
because they seem offended about what he has done.

Now...it doesn't seem that they are most offended
by the idea that God would be among the Gentiles...
or that they would be baptized

(which might make sense for them to object to...

At this point it was still a controversial thing whether or how non-Jewish people could become a part of the community of people who followed Jesus.)

But it wasn't that they had been baptized...

or that they had shown themselves to be faithful.

No, they want to know why Peter stayed at a Gentile home and ate with them... their food, their house, their customs.

Maybe they were only comfortable with them being allowed if they became more "like us."

(Sounds a little familiar.)

The offense is in the eating...in getting too close...

And isn't that so often the case?

We love everyone in theory...

until we realize that having them as part of us...part of the family... means that we will also be changed.

We don't get to stay the same.

Perhaps that fear of difference

fuels so many harmful ways of seeing the world.

I once heard a saying about the difference

between how racism looks in the north compared to the south:

In the South, the attitude of white folks is:

"Get as close as you want but don't get too high;"

whereas, up North, the attitude is:

"Get as high as you want...but don't get too close."

Cornelius's family got too close...inviting people in for dinner...

not changing themselves to go fit in

and join the dinner table with the food and customs

that were familiar to the Jewish believers.

Peter being willing to join *their* table, to welcome *their* customs,

started making it feel like the community of Jesus followers

might really have to change if Gentiles were allowed...

which, of course, it did.

Jesus' command to love each other in a new way...

and Peter's vision that the lines between clean and unclean

and Jew and Gentile weren't about to stop the Holy Spirit...

these are stories we need as much now as ever.

Because when we can trust that God is not only

where we have already been...

then we can go without fear into the unfamiliar

trusting that we will discover God there, as well,

among the people whose customs and stories we haven't yet learned.

So, we get to keep setting another place at the table...

and sometimes...

accepting an open seat at a table where we have never been.

Because that is what the household of God is like.

And of course, we have and will continue to fail

to live up to this commandment...to this vision...

We will fail to keep the circle open...

to stop drawing lines between us and them...

to keep setting a place at the table

and making it a welcoming place

for those who have been unwelcome...

to be brave enough to accept an invitation

where the food and the people are unfamiliar.

But our resistance will not change God's heart and hope...

Because God...God wants nothing more than to be with us...

and for us to be with each other.

God sets a table for all of us...

And if we are listening closely to the final chapters of the book of Revelation,
which we heard from today...we know...

that God isn't setting that table in a place far away...
more perfect and worthy.
God makes a home with us here...God's table is here.
God wants to dwell with us here...now...in this world...

"See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes."

God is making all things new.
An old world of division and isolation...
transformed to community and love.
An old world of fear and judgment...
becoming a new world of curiosity and hope.

It is all here for the feasting.
May we be loving enough
to always have a place open for the newcomer...
and may we be brave enough to accept a place
at the tables that are unfamiliar.

Because when we do,
we learn that they are the same table after all...
and we have only begun to taste the flavors of the feast to come.

Thanks be to God. Amen.