

May 15, 2022

5th Easter Year C

Acts 11: 1-18

Psalm 148

John 13: 31-35

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Acts 11:1-18

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "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. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The 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. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 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?" When 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."

The Episcopal 101 class met yesterday for their second session together, and we covered the 2000+ years of the history of Christianity in about an hour! We traced the story of our faith from the days of Jesus, to the early church, through the establishment of the Roman Catholic Church, through the great Schism, to the Reformation, and onward to today.

And in our whirlwind tour we saw over and over again how we humans yearn and work and scheme to set limits on God's love, to set limits on God's invitation, and how God, despite us, not because of us, keeps breaking through the walls we build around our faith and makes room at the table for all.

We traced the emergence of the Episcopal Church and saw how over and over we excluded and God invited in, and not only allowed others to attend, but broke open our locked doors and invited them to serve fully in the church as deacons, priests and bishops. People of color, women, LGBTQ folks, all excluded and then all, by the grace and power of God, invited to the table.

2000+ years of Christianity showed us how the church, that imperfect expression of God's perfect love, keeps moving forward, struggling with our sinful, excluding selves. As humans we are so quick to judge, to establish, who is in and who is out, who is worthy and who is unworthy.

And our reading from Acts today reminds us that we wrestle with this tendency with none other than the disciple, Peter, the rock on which our church was built.

Peter has been a devout Jew all his life, and as he has followed Jesus and now proclaims Jesus as the Messiah, he still has seen the gift of Jesus as one for those like him, for the Jewish people. But God has nudged and guided Peter until he has preached to and baptized several Gentiles, non-Jews. And too Peter stayed with these Gentiles and ate meals with them, a sign of friendship and acceptance.

In our reading today, Peter is confronted by other leaders of the early church for his time with the Gentiles.

And Peter tells them of the vision God gave to him. As a Jew Peter has following the kosher rules for eating all his life. But in the vision, those rules

of what is clean and unclean to eat, are pushed aside and Peter is mightily challenged to let go of rules and beliefs that have framed his entire life. After the vision, three men arrive at Peter's house from Caesarea, and Peter is instructed:

The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.

And Peter preaches to the visitors and welcomes them, adding:

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?

And the leaders finally understand Peter's actions and offer that still oh, so human so like us, praise to God!

And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

We still can't sound like God, generous and welcoming, instead we characterize God like us, giving one more inch at a time, giving, *"even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."*

And in our run through the 2000+ years of the history of Christianity and our Episcopal piece in that history, over and over again we saw how we exclude and God invites in, God has given even to the blacks, God has given even to the women, God has given even to LGBTQ folks, God has given.....

May we finally stop building walls, and excluding and be able to say, God has given even to me, with all my mistakes and shortcomings, God has given even to me, God has welcomed even me. And be thankful.

As our final hymn today will remind us, echoing the words of our Gospel reading from the Last Supper, when Jesus gave us the new commandment, to love one another:

"In Christ there is no East or West, there is no South or North, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide world."

Amen.