

Sermon for Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 18, 2025
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Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico

Acts 11:1-18
Psalm 148
Revelation 21:1-6
John 13:31-35

Today we read from the enigmatic Gospel of John.
Tradition says John, the beloved disciple, lived out his life in Ephesus and died around the year 100 A.D.
The early Church Father Jerome described how John continued to preach at the Church in Ephesus well into his nineties.
At his great age, John was so feeble that he had to be carried into the church. Then, when he couldn't preach a regular length sermon, he would lean up on one elbow and only say: "Little children love one another." The Apostle then would be carried out of the church.
This went on for weeks. Every week he repeated his one-sentence sermon: "Little children, love one another."
Bored with this repetition the congregation finally asked, "Master, why do you always say this?"
"Because," the elder John replied, "it is the Lord's command, and if this only is done, it is enough."

Jesus is facing the reality that he is going to die.
As with all of us in the fullness of time, Jesus faces his own mortality:

"Where I am going, you cannot come."

He wants to know that his life with them has made a difference.
He wants to know that the three years he has spent teaching them has not been for naught. So he challenges them.

"I give you a new commandment,
that you love one another.
Just as I have loved you,
you also should love one another.
By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,
if you have love for one another."

This was not a suggestion on Jesus' part.

Just as John told the people in Ephesus, This is a commandment.

We are told to love one another.
That does not mean loving those we like.

It doesn't mean loving those who come to church.

It doesn't mean loving those we agree with.

It means loving everyone.

Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul,
and with all thy mind.

This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor
as thyself.

On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.

And that's not an easy thing to do – by any stretch of the imagination.

And that's the problem for Peter in the Acts reading.

Once again, we hear the story of Peter's dream
and the vision and Baptism of Cornelius.

Why? You may ask.

Well, Peter is summoned to Jerusalem,
The first bunch that were saved by Jesus Christ want to know
just what has Peter been up to.

Their stand was simple:

You want to gather the Gentiles – fine.

You want to preach to the Gentiles – fine.

You want to share the Gospel with the Gentiles – fine.

You want to eat with the Gentiles – Absolutely NOT.

Now the Jewish dietary laws were not just a matter of piety.
The rules that governed what you ate and who you could eat with
served as a reminder of the distinction between Jew and Gentile.

The fact that Peter was sharing meals with Gentiles evoked anger and fear.
Anger that Peter was forsaking God's laws
and fear that once the lines were blurred
it would be difficult to tell who was and who was not God's people.

The question was simple: What are you doing associating with THOSE people?

There have always been THOSE people.
There are always THOSE people.
There always will be THOSE people.

Name any group you can think of,

particularly those who have been disenfranchised or marginalized,
and you will find Jesus standing with them.

Back at the Episcopal Church where I first found my spiritual home
we had three priests in the five years I attended.
The last one ministered to street people,
and the people of the church applauded his ministry to them.
That is, they appreciated the Outreach Ministry
– until the people he ministered to started coming to church on Sundays.

And here were newcomers who didn't know when to stand
or when to kneel or the limits of expression.
They'd waved their hands in the air if they felt moved by the Spirit.
They'd say Hallelujah and Amen during the sermon.
One young man even did cartwheels across the back of the church.

It took awhile for folks to adjust to the newcomers.
Sounds much the same as the folks who summoned Peter to Jerusalem.

So Peter once again tells of his vision:

“All sorts of animals appeared before me and God tells me to kill and eat.
But I say, ‘No Way. I’m not eating anything that’s unclean.’
But then the voice tells me:

**‘What God has made clean,
you must not call profane.’**

This happens three times.
How can I ignore God’s command?”

Peter tells them of being summoned to the house of Cornelius
with the guidance of the Holy Spirit
and accompanied by some of the faithful.

And he witnessed the Holy Spirit falling on the Gentile household
just as it had on the twelve at Pentecost in Jerusalem.

“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.’”

And Peter asks the big question:
if they’re receiving the same spirit:
“who was I to hinder God?”

As you might imagine: The elders of Jerusalem were silent.
They could have retired to consider their opinion.
They could have invited the wise among them
to come up with a reasoned treatise to respond to the question.
They could have conferred to write a joint communique.
Nobody made a motion.
Nobody suggested going into executive session to craft a deliberative response.

Just Silence.

And then...

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

We don't always remember that last part.
Sometimes when we witness the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst
the only proper response is silence
and awe at what has been done in our midst.

We, each and every one of us, witness to the world the love of God in Christ –
NOT by our buildings,
NOT by golden statues,
NOT by what we have,
BUT by the lives we live each and every day.

We are called to love each other –
not just those we care for,
not just those who are like us,
not just those we know, but all of us –
no matter who we are,
where we are from,
what we believe... everyone.

Let us pray:
God of glory, whose Beloved took the shadow road
and found life in the darkness: May his love be our law,
undimmed by the fear that condemns what it does not understand;
slipping through the hands of those who cling to sacred power;
making us witness to the power of new birth;
through Jesus Christ, the Firstborn. Amen.*

* Collect for Easter 5; *Prayers for an Inclusive Church*, Steven Shakespeare, Church Publishing, New York, ©2009, p. 93.