

May 19, 2019
Vicar Jonah

Easter 5
Acts 11:1-18

“Love One Another”

May the grace and peace of almighty God bless you and keep you.

In my hometown there are almost as many churches as there are people. That’s a bit of an exaggeration, but in a community of a few hundred people, there are 4 Baptist, 2 Catholic, 3 Anglican, 4 Pentecostal, 2 United, and 3 Non-denominational churches. That’s a total of 18 churches, which makes an average of about 16 people per church; some have higher attendance and some have less, but what I grew to find both hilarious and frustrating about these churches was that each of them truly taught and believed that they were the one and only true church of Christ. So, as a young Pentecost, you might imagine that I was constantly being chastised for attending youth group at the Baptist church. When I finally “converted” to the Baptist church, I began being chastised for dating a girl who attended a different Baptist church in the community. Each of these churches felt as though they were genuinely acting out of Christian love. They wanted to protect me from the “sinful” and to be frank, “wrong” theologies that other churches held and believed. But as a young adult I did not do so well with being told what to do. So as an act of rebellion, I began attending as many churches as I could. In fact, I went to church 7 days a week, sometimes multiple times in one day. I became an active participant in 11 of those 18 churches and the community had no idea what to call me. Is he Baptist? United? Pentecostal? Non-denominational? I had them so confused.

But for me, the black and white boundaries that divided one church from another quickly began to fade as I built relationships with the people of each unique congregation. What each of these churches failed to realize is that they were not so different from one another. They loved and worshipped the same God – believed in the same message of mercy and grace – and trusted in the same gift of salvation given by God who loves them equally and the same. I struggled to understand how a people so intrinsically connected by the same gospel message of grace ... could be so divided. Each church in my community believed that the gospel message of Christ’s love was for them, but the walls of difference and division blinded them from seeing how that same message of unconditional love might be extended for others.

Likewise, in today’s reading from the book of Acts, Luke recounts Peter’s struggle with a similar type of division amidst the followers of Christ. From the text, it is clear that Jewish believers in Christ feel as though the gift of salvation has been made available for them exclusively. This idea is perhaps rooted in Jewish law, which stated that it was “unlawful [for] a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation” (Acts 10). Jewish law was designed to create a just or “clean” nation of God. Gentiles, or non-Jewish people, then, were often viewed as unclean. It is in this context that God, through a vision, speaks to Peter. In this vision, Peter sees something similar to a sheet being lowered from heaven by its four corners (Acts 11:5) and as he looks at it closely, he sees “four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air” (Acts 11:6); many of which are non-kosher animals, that is, animals that are treated as unclean and unlawful to eat under Jewish law.

It therefore comes as somewhat of a surprise when God’s voice seemingly instructs Peter to break Jewish law by killing and eating the animals. Peter, of course, refuses to break the law and repeatedly explains that he has never allowed anything unclean to enter his mouth (Acts 11:8). Peter is adhering to the law – he is doing what he believes is proper or correct. But as was often the case in Christ’s earthly

ministry, God is offering a different interpretation of the law. Through the example of unclean animals, Peter is being reminded that God alone decides the parameters of what is clean and unclean. In the NRSV translation of the text that we heard this morning, verse 9 reads: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” but a more literal interpretation of the original Greek reads: “What God has cleansed, you must not call unholy.” That is, what once perhaps seemed unclean, through the power of God’s almighty mercy and grace, can be restored to a state of cleanliness.

The vision continues as God appears to further iterate this lesson for Peter and when it ends, everything is pulled up to heaven and suddenly, three men from Caesarea, men who would likely have been treated as unclean under the standards of Jewish law, appear and want Peter to go with them. The Holy Spirit encourages Peter to journey with them and to make no distinction between them and himself. Peter of course complies and in doing so becomes witness to the Holy Spirit falling upon these Gentiles in the same way that it fell upon Jewish believers in Christ on the Day of Pentecost. Peter then associates the gift of the Holy Spirit with the gift of baptism and begins to teach that the gift of life, the gift of Jesus Christ, is not only for Jew but also for Gentile, thus making room for the fulfillment of what Luke iterates in Acts 1:8 – that the gospel message of Jesus Christ will extend to even the ends of the earth.

The gospel message amidst today’s narrative is that God’s love has made way for all people to find healing, restoration, and renewal. God’s love extends beyond the boundaries of law and offers the gospel message of Jesus Christ. God takes what once might have seemed unclean and calls it holy through the lens of perfect mercy and grace. God looks beyond the walls of division and calls all to join in the unifying gift of Christ.

In today’s text, Gentile believers are not suddenly converted to Judaism – nor do they lose their social distinction as Gentiles, instead by the power of the Holy Spirit, both Jew and Gentile are joined as one family of God where their differences are embraced by the same message of love, forgiveness, and hope. They are brought together by the gospel message of Christ, a message that seeks to unify, not divide. A message that calls believers to look beyond the walls of difference and division so that we might see the common humanity in one another.

Yet, here we are, beyond a millennium later, living in a world that is perhaps more divided than it has ever been. Divided by race, social hierarchy, income levels, language, religion, and the list goes on. Christian divided from Christian, church divided from church, a family of believers who share so much in common, yet distance one another in light of differing ideologies and theologies. Martin Luther often stated that we are both saint and sinner. That is people who simultaneously are vulnerable to the influence of sin and the restorative power of grace. As we journey through life we are liable to make mistakes, to wrongly judge wrong or right, but God’s everlasting love through Christ looks beyond our sinful nature and calls us holy and justified by faith through grace. And that is the same love that Christ calls his believers to share in today’s gospel text: love one another as I have loved you. That is, love one another in a way that embraces both similarity and difference with a spirit of humility, understanding, forgiveness, and grace.

Growing up as a rebellious mix of Christian denominations, I often wondered: what if people focused on their similarities rather than their differences? What might happen if God’s children were joined as one family working together to share and proclaim Christ’s gospel message of love within the world? What if

conflicting theologies and ideologies were treated with the same love and grace that God through Christ, embraces us with? And perhaps that is the challenge of both today's gospel text and today's reading from Acts: to love one another just as Christ loves us.

Christ calls us to love another just as he loves us. And what the gospel teaches us about Christ's love is that it remains abundantly full of mercy and grace even when we react with bitterness and betrayal. Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. Christ's love was steadfast and persistent, even when those he came to save put him to death on a cross. God embraces division and difference with kindness, compassion, and with love. A love that heals, a love that restores and brings hope and unity amidst the heartache of division, separation, and despair. A love that the children of God are called to emulate throughout the entirety of the world.

"Love one another just as I have loved you."

Amen.