

Love One Another

On the Sundays after Easter this year I find myself drawn more to the readings from the Acts of the Apostles than the Gospel lessons. Maybe that's because Acts describes the real life of the church, how all those imperfect human beings tried to make sense of the resurrection of Jesus. Isn't that what we still do today? What difference should belief in the risen Christ make in our lives and how we interact with other people?

Today's passage from Acts, for instance, has all the elements of what we see in the church and in our world. Peter, in spite of his own misgivings, let himself be led by the Spirit into an expanded understanding of who gets to experience new life in Christ. When Peter acted on that understanding and baptized non-Jews, the criticism began. Rumor got back to zealous Jewish Christians in Jerusalem that Peter had defiled himself by eating with uncircumcised men – Gentiles, outsiders, the wrong people. Some leader he was!

I love the way Peter explained himself “step by step.” He didn't attack his detractors. He didn't act as though he knew better. He understood that this would be difficult for them to accept, so he explained it patiently, carefully, starting from the beginning. While he was praying, he said, he had a vision and heard a voice. The voice told him to eat unclean food. Peter protested and the angel said, don't call unclean what God has made clean. Three times that vision occurred. Then Peter heard human voices asking for him. Again the Spirit spoke, telling him to go with those men and not think about “them and us.” Note that Peter did not go alone; he took six others with him who later corroborated his story to the skeptics in Jerusalem. Right away we're shown that evangelism is not a solo activity.

Cornelius, the man whom they visited, had had his own vision in which Simon Peter was said to have a message of salvation. So when Peter arrived he preached the Gospel, and with such power! As he talked the Holy Spirit fell upon the assembled Gentiles just as it had fallen on the apostles at Pentecost. How could Peter deny the reality of that? Even his opponents were silenced. I'm not sure they were totally convinced, however. I suspect that they still refused to eat with Gentiles, but at least they admitted that God was doing a new thing.

We are long past the distinction between Jew and Gentile in the Christian church. Yet we still struggle with the very human tendency to decide who is in and who is out. The closer someone is to us, the more energy we have over the distinction. Episcopalians will readily work with Lutherans and Methodists, but it's a rare occasion when there's fellowship with those who left the Episcopal Church. That's why I was so heartened by Edward MacBurney's funeral here yesterday. I will be eternally grateful that both our Bishop Betsey and the Bishop from the Anglican Church in North America laid aside their theological differences and treated one another with respect. It's a testimony to how grounded both of them are in Jesus Christ.

Love one another. That's the new commandment that Jesus gave to his disciples at the Last Supper, that we heard again this morning. Why is that commandment so hard to carry out? We experience God's love in so many ways each day, yet we find it so difficult to extend that love to those we perceive as different from us. The angel's command not to make a distinction between them and us is still valid, not only in the church but also in the world around us.

Preaching at Trinity Cathedral on Easter Sunday, Bishop Monnot insisted that love always wins. That is the message of the resurrection. On this earth God's love is expressed through fragile, imperfect human beings like Peter and his opponents and all of us. If we're grounded in prayer, we're more likely to hear the Spirit calling us to stretch our understanding, to do the things that we resist. We may still object to the expansion of who is included within God's love, yet that love will break through. Always. It's the message we hear week after week in the Easter readings. Love always wins. Thanks be to God for that!

[Fifth Sunday of Easter: Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35.]