

A Love That's Not Mutual

5 Easter C

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First Reading: Acts 11:1-18

In defense of his earlier baptism of non-Jewish believers, Peter demonstrates to the members of the Jerusalem church that God's intention to love Gentiles as well as Jews is revealed in Jesus' testimony. In this way the mission to the Gentiles is officially authorized.

¹Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" ⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵"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. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The 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. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' ¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷If then God gave them the same gift that God gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" ¹⁸When 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."

Gospel: John 13:31-35

After washing the disciples' feet, predicting his betrayal, and then revealing his betrayer, Jesus speaks of his glorification on the cross. This deep complicated love of Jesus, even to death on the cross, will be the distinctive mark of Jesus' community.

³¹When Judas 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 God's own self 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 Judeans 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."

Overview - **God's Beautifully Messy Community**

From abandonment to homecoming and from a narrow scope to a broader vision of God's realm, these are the promises proclaimed. The early church and our faith communities are called to engage this reality. A community of Jewish Jesus-followers overcomes fear and expands to include the much larger Gentile world. Jesus shares that he will no longer be physically present with his disciples, and points them to a new way of being a community of love for one another. Through the depth of the texts for this day, people are invited to explore the beauty and the messiness of community. The church, like any other human organization, is filled with the challenges of what it means to live together (for example, who is welcome? What rules do people need to follow? How do we care for one another?). Unlike other human institutions, however, we are called to be centered and re-centered in the unapologetic love for others. In our imperfection we are welcomed and called to invite others. We offer, in a spirit of humility, signs of welcome and love to others, just as God in Christ has been revealed to us.

Experiential Idea

Today you might consider bringing a large bedsheet for the children's sermon, an echo of the first reading from Acts. As the children come forward, ask each of them to grab hold of one edge of the sheet. When you say "go," all quickly run under the sheet. What do we learn? That, just as Peter saw that everything God had made was good, so the many different people in God's household are gathered into one and made good by Jesus.

Theological Reflection

The new Jerusalem of Revelation is not an earthly city (Augustine's *Civitas Terrena*) simply made *better*, but a new creation entirely. This matters because Lutherans have long held that we are not saved by works; our justification does not come by making a given city—or our present existence—more virtuous. Rather, the new Jerusalem is *newness*; it is a newly-created thing that comes as a gift from God in which everything is being regifted by God's grace. Faith in the future manifestation of this city does not, however, negate our thankfulness here. But beware: we await a *new* Jerusalem, and that new city is not this old one.

Theological Reflection

Though Jesus gives a new commandment today, it is not the greatest commandment that he gives. Bear in mind that though love is certainly highly valued, and even demonstrated by Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet, it is not, in fact, the greatest commandment. The greatest commandment is loving God first (Matt. 22:37). Love of neighbor is second. This is important because Lutherans have often viewed the love of God as faith (*fide*) and care of neighbor as a work in response to that faith (*caritas*). The former saves; the latter does not—just as these two great commandments (but one is greater!) are placed together but are not interchangeable.

Theological Reflection

We like to put people into categories. Maybe this tendency dates to prehistoric times when humans had to decide quickly who was friend and who was foe. Maybe this is about a human tendency toward self-justification. Wanting to be on the right side of things, Peter was a faithful Jew; circumcised, always eating the right things, and avoiding anything unclean or profane. But when you draw a line and place people on the other side of that line, God is on the other side of that line with them. The issue of ritually clean and unclean foods was significant in Peter's day. Consider some distinctions which might seem important today but are really arbitrary. What can we learn today from Peter's vision?

Theological Reflection

The gospel begins: "When he had gone out" (John 13:31). The "he" in question is Judas. Immediately before this Jesus washes the disciples' feet. This means Jesus washed Judas's feet. Jesus washed Judas's feet moments before Judas left to betray

Jesus. Imagine knowing someone would betray you and still moments before serving them in love.

5th Sunday of Easter

Easter lasts for several more weeks. The 3 readings continue the unfolding of the meaning of the resurrection: the loving community formed by God's love and baptized with the water of life includes those who had been previously deemed unacceptable. All things are being made new, for the resurrection continues through the power of the Spirit.

[John 13:31-35](#)

John's gospel, written probably in the mid-90s, is comprised of two parts: chapters 1–12, sometimes called the Book of Signs, and chapters 13–20 (21), the Book of Glory. The Book of Glory opens (chap. 13) with the sign of the footwashing and its interpretation, which is a short discourse on the meaning of glory. What in the late first century was a scandal for the Christian movement—Jesus' passion and crucifixion—is here described as the glory of the apocalyptic Son of Man and thus also of God. The love that binds together the Father with the Son is now to bind together the members of the community. For such love, the passion was necessary: thus the surprising use of the category "glory." The loving community of the church manifests the glory of God, which surprisingly is seen in the passion and death of Christ. That Christ, the Son of God, submitted to death reveals a loving, sacrificing God who nurtures a community that also is known for its mutual love and service. In about 200 ce Tertullian wrote that outsiders said of Christians, "See how they love one another," a testimony especially to Christian care for the poor, the sick and the dying. In such love is the glory of God.

Jesus is preparing his followers for his departure. After the Last Supper, he has washed the feet of his disciples, a symbol of servanthood. Peter has misunderstood Jesus' action; Jesus has told him that to share in Christ requires that Jesus be his servant as well as his master. Peter will understand "later" (v. [7](#)): when Jesus is on the cross. Jesus has said, "you are clean, though not all of you" (v. [10](#)). Then, generalizing, he says that, per his example, each Christian is to be a servant to every other (v. [14](#)). Jesus has predicted his betrayal (vv. [18](#), [21](#)); he has shown Peter and the disciple "whom Jesus loved" (v. [23](#)) who this will be. Judas ("he", v. [31](#)) has gone out into the "night" (v. [30](#)) – a symbol of the dark deed he is about to commit. The glorification (revelation of the essence of) the "Son of Man" (v. [31](#)), the ideal human, Jesus, is

already in progress; the Father is already being revealed in him. The Father has been revealed (“glorified”, v. [32](#)) in Jesus, so Jesus is a way of seeing God now (“at once”). In John and 1 John, Jesus calls his faithful followers “little children” (v. [33](#)). Jesus tells them that his time on earth with them is very soon to end. They cannot join him in heaven now, but he “will come again and will take you to myself” ([14:3](#)). Judaism required one to *love one’s neighbour as oneself* (Leviticus [19:18](#)). Jesus’ commandment is “new” (v. [34](#)) in that, in his self-offering, he is model of, motive for, and cause for, loving one another. Mutual love will show who follows Christ.

[Acts 11:1-18](#)

Acts 1–9 has focused on the mission to Jews in and around Jerusalem; today’s excerpt is part of the second half of Acts, beginning with chapter 10, which describes the Gentile mission throughout the Roman Empire. In this excerpt, which repeats 10:10-16, Luke relies on his talent for narrative to convey the Christian movement’s increasing openness to Gentiles. Christians are released from the primary markers of Jewish observance, male circumcision (v. 3) and the keeping of kosher (v. 9). As if in Luke’s time a controversy about Gentile inclusion still remained, the baptizing of Gentiles is credited to obedience to the Holy Spirit. Throughout the centuries, Christians have debated the meaning of church membership and its openness to nonmembers. So Peter’s vision continues to challenge the church: what in our time and in our religious community are the rules that separate insiders from outsiders? Does Luke intend that Christians have no such barriers? Christians have not agreed to what extent Luke’s call to repentance (v. 18) fits with the elimination of any traditions of religion or morality.

Images in the Readings

John’s gospel teaches Christians to redefine the word **glory**. Often in typical religious speech, glory refers to the unutterable power of the divine, and it is contrasted with the human condition of weakness and death. Sometimes in the Old Testament, the phrase “the glory of the Lord” describes overwhelming natural phenomena that indicate God’s powerful presence. However, in the 4th Gospel, divine glory is seen not only in the signs Jesus performed, but also in his passion, death, and resurrection. 4th century Christians saw in the Easter celebration of the 3 Days one way to express the single meaning of this threefold event, the single glory through which Christ conquered evil. A stranger to Christianity may find a large crucifix morbid, but the New Testament teaches that in this paradoxical cross is the glory of God. In the eyes of God, **birds of prey**—yes, hawks, buzzards, and vultures—are clean.

Connections with the Liturgy

The final verse of today's gospel is the same as that of Maundy Thursday, when the community has enacted the love of Christ in the footwashing. Although some Christians teach that a personal emotional experience of the indwelling of God is necessary for salvation, the rite of Holy Baptism (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* pp. 227-31) repeats Luke's emphasis that baptism itself brings the gift of the Holy Spirit. Thus there is no requirement for a subsequent personal experience or any extraordinary manifestations of the Spirit.

Some Questions for Loving in a Non-Mutual Way.

We are often a people of mutuality: "I do for you, the way I want you to do for me," etc. But God's love is NOT this way; God loves because that is who God is and what God does regardless of who we are or what we do. Do you see this in the texts: God loves even the outsider, even the different ones, even the ones who haven't done the work or obeyed the traditions we have observed OR Jesus washes the feet of his disciples including Judas even when he KNOWS that Judas is going to betray him, loves the World and will die for it even when it crucifies him, teaches when running should be his agenda, gives a Commandment to love when commanding his forces to fight would be what many of us would do? How do you go about this in your life? How do you love unlovable people? How do you understand still needing to make judgments and carry out discipline but holding fast and even expressing love in the doing of those things? Why do you think God's like this? Following God's model, what does Loving mean? How do you balance this with the, "Don't throw your pearls before swine..." passage?