

May 5, 2024  
Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year B  
Grace Church, Muncie  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

*Acts 10:44-48*

*Psalm 98*

*1 John 5:1-6*

*John 15:9-17*

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia!

In this morning's Gospel, we rejoin Jesus and the disciples as they walk from the Upper Room towards the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus will soon be arrested, and the disciples will flee. There is an increasing sense of urgency in the narrative. John has Jesus speaking oceans of words to the disciples in those last few hours.

Last week, we heard Jesus talk about his relationship to us *I am the vine, you are the branches* (Jn 15:5). Today, Jesus tells the disciples, *this is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you* (Jn 15:12).

The language of commandment is deliberate, and it's not the first time we've heard it. Jesus told them the same thing after he washed their feet (Jn 13:34). *Agape*, the word for "love" used by John is also deliberate. *Agape* is an intentional love that expects nothing in return. Mark never uses the word; Matthew and Luke, only once each. But it occurs seven times in John, mostly in these chapters before the arrest. In the first letter of John, we find it 18 times.

By washing the disciples' feet, Jesus makes it clear that this command to love is not about tender emotions, but about action. In order to obey Jesus' commandment to love, his followers have to do something.

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The history of the early church that we find in the Acts of the Apostles lays out for us story after story of the earliest followers of Jesus trying to obey this very commandment to love one another. As the Book of Acts unfolds, we see the early Christians challenged by the Spirit of God again and again to look beyond their usual boundaries in order to share the love of the risen Christ – often with surprising people. Last week we heard about an African eunuch; today we hear about a Roman soldier. Apparently, when Jesus commanded them to love one another, he meant everybody.

In today's first lesson, we hear the very end of the story of Peter's encounter with Cornelius, a Roman centurion. It is a familiar story: Peter is praying on the roof, when he has a confusing vision of a sheet full of unclean animals.

In the meantime, Cornelius, who is described as a God-fearing man, also has a vision while praying, a vision that prompts him to send some of his men to fetch Peter.

Peter's experience of the voice from heaven, telling him not to judge things as unclean that God has deemed clean, prepares him to meet Cornelius. It is hard to imagine what a challenge this must have been for Peter. His culture and his religion told him that going to the home of a gentile was wrong and perhaps a little sickening. In order to obey the heavenly vision, Peter has to do something that is completely contrary to everything he believes.

Peter goes to Cornelius and testifies to him about Jesus – at least he starts to. Because while Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and his household. Peter may have thought that he was making a big concession by agreeing to visit this gentile at his home, that he was bringing the Good News like a gift, that he had the upper hand. But God's Spirit bypassed everything and came upon Cornelius and his household in some unmistakable way. This experience of the Spirit at work in people who look, speak and eat differently from him converted Peter as well. He said, *can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?*

From the time the Book of Acts was assembled until now, the continuing challenge to the church is to live into Jesus' commandment to love one another. It seems to be human nature to draw borders around ourselves, maintaining lines that define "us" and "them." But is the Spirit's nature to push us past our boundaries, calling on us to grow.

God's desire for us, embodied in Jesus and demonstrated by the early church, is for us to expand our understanding, and to accept with grace the fact that our vision of God and God's kingdom is necessarily limited.

If we are going to manage to love one another as Jesus commands, there is a humility required of us. An ancient definition of God says that God is a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.<sup>1</sup>

As Peter discovered when he visited Cornelius, we do not have exclusive access to God's truth, God's Spirit or God's love. We possess a piece of the puzzle, and others – people who in all likelihood don't look or talk like us – have other pieces. God is bigger than we are, and not comprehensible in full by humans. It takes all of our puzzle pieces to begin to comprehend the reality of the Holy in our midst.

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<sup>1</sup> Although this concept, known as *Pascal's Sphere*, was made famous by Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), it has a longer pre-history. Its origin is attributed to Hermes Trismegistus (3<sup>rd</sup> century AD?) and rediscovered by Alain de Lille (1128-1223).

If you believe that you have all the answers, you don't need community, except perhaps to make you feel superior. If, however, we understand ourselves to be limited beings, loving an unlimited God, we might choose to seek God wherever God might be found – which is everywhere and in everyone.

It bears repeating that Jesus loves us all. Jesus loved Peter, the one who denied him. Jesus also loved Cornelius, who was devout, and a Roman soldier, like those who crucified him. Jesus loves you, and Jesus loves me. By grace, we are all beloved, even those we don't like and those who don't like us.

The medieval mystics who contemplated the profuse love of Jesus that we are commanded to embody found a perfect image: they described Jesus as our mother. Anselm of Canterbury, one of the most important theologians of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, wrote:

Jesus, as a mother you gather your people to you;  
you are gentle with us as a mother with her children.  
Often you weep over our sins and our pride, \*  
tenderly you draw us from hatred and judgment.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus commands us to love one another in the same manner as he has loved us – with the self-offering love a mother bears for her children ... all of her children. But, like the early church, we are still twisted up in knots, wondering just whom we are called to love, just who belongs; but Jesus has no such questions. Elsewhere in John's gospel, Jesus puts it this way: *I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself* (Jn 12:32). Not *some of all, or most of all. Just all.*

We are one, despite all our pretending otherwise. At the same time, each of us is also unique. What we can learn from Peter and Cornelius is that we are all equal in our need of God's love and grace – and we also need one another so that our vision of that grace can expand. Each person we meet and each person who meets us brings something to the table – and all of us are changed as our experience of God's expansive love opens out.

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There are places all around us where we see this happening. I want to tell you about one such place here in Muncie that I see on a regular basis. On Monday evenings during the school year, Grace Village sponsors a gathering called *God & Grub*. Grace Village is an ecumenical and inclusive campus ministry at Ball State – the only affirming campus ministry out of dozens. Some years, we struggle to attract folks. This year, the Spirit was plenty busy, and we averaged a couple dozen students every week.

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<sup>2</sup> Canticle Q. *A Song of Christ's Goodness*, from *Enriching our Worship I*, (1998), p, 39.

As I listened to their stories, it was clear that most of them had been abused or rejected by their home faith communities (some by their families) because they identified as queer, or as allies of queer folk. Lots of us/them, lots of boundaries, lots of closed doors, lots of trauma.

Yet, even in the face of the damage the church has done, here they were – young and bright and searching, and knowing two things. One – who they were, or who they were becoming, and two – they were seeking a life of faith in a community that could see them fully. The food that was provided by the supporting churches, including Grace, was not, in a strict sense, the Eucharist. But the sharing of that meal in that community was always an occasion of thanksgiving and companionship.

Last Monday was the final meeting for the school year. We were joined by Bishop Jennifer and Canon Giulianna, which brought its own level of excitement. How many college students get to hang out with a bishop?

The most moving thing for me that night was to hear students reflect on the grace of finding a community of faith that would see them, listen to them, take them seriously despite differences and disagreements. And that, in allowing themselves to be seen, they were also changed. I wonder what my life would have been like if I had had that kind of experience in college. Thank God that these students have a deeply Spirit-filled community... and continue to invite others into it.

I have to tell you that, in addition to the time we spend together here on Sunday morning and Sunday afternoon, those Monday nights at Grace Village are the most joyful hours of my week.

Jesus commanded us to love one another. To embody *agape*, the love modeled for us in the self-offering of Jesus, the love that draws us across the boundaries that we use to divide ourselves. At this altar, or in the Parish Hall, or at Grace Village, every meal we eat, every bit of hospitality we offer, every encounter with the unknown in another reminds us of God's deep, abiding grace that binds us all, in spite of our differences, into one body.

Here is Anselm again:

Lord Jesus, in your mercy, heal us;  
In your love and tenderness, remake us.  
In your compassion, bring grace and forgiveness,  
For the beauty of heaven, may your love prepare us.

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia! Amen.