

Sunday, May 19, 2019
Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year C)
Acts 11.1-18; Revelation 21.1-6; John 13.31-35
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

There are certain doctrines that are foundational to who we are as Christians. These are statements of our beliefs that are inviolable. That are not open to negotiation. Commandments found in Scripture, such as the Ten Commandments and the Great Commandment. And statements of faith carefully crafted by Ecumenical Councils, such as the Nicene Creed and the Apostles Creed. And then, of course, there are the two doctrines that reign supreme throughout the Church: “We’ve always done it that way” and “We’ve never done it that way.”

With all due respect to two millennia of church tradition, “We’ve always done it that way” and “We’ve never done it that way” just aren’t options. At least not for the Church as envisioned by Christ and as ordained by God. We see this pretty clearly in all three of our Scripture readings for today. Readings that are about God establishing something new. Because after all, isn’t that what Easter is about? Something radically new? You can’t get much more radically new than resurrection and new life.

Easter and resurrection and new life are not just about what happened to Jesus some 2,000 years ago. It is something that continues on through the ages. Something that we seek to remember and celebrate during Eastertide. In our liturgical calendar, we have reached the point in the Easter season that we no longer have post-Resurrection appearances. Instead, for the remainder of Eastertide, we focus on the meaning of Christ’s Resurrection for the church, the world, and for us as individuals—as those who comprise the Body of Christ in the world. How we are to live into the new life, the resurrected life, that Jesus ushered in through his Resurrection. And this is an ongoing process, even after 2,000 years.

Jesus laid the groundwork for what this looks like even before his own death. Our Gospel reading for today is actually set in the hours before Jesus’ arrest, as he shares a final meal with his disciples. In anticipation of his death and Resurrection, and our own resurrected life, Jesus prepares his closest followers by giving them a new commandment that they are to follow and live into even as he was about to go to his death. “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (Jn 13.34).

Now, to be sure, to love one another was not really a new commandment. This basic commandment goes back to the very roots of the Old Testament. In Leviticus, we hear the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves (Lev. 19.18). So, how is what Jesus tells his disciples a “new commandment?” The answer lies in one key phrase. Jesus tells the disciples that they are to love one another. But this is not sufficient. For he then adds, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” This calls to mind what Jesus did—or rather, from their perspective, what Jesus will do. How Jesus loves us by going to the cross for our sake. The ultimate expression of love. To sacrifice himself, out of love. To give his life so that ours might be spared, out of love. In so doing, Jesus reframes the old law, giving it extra weight. Giving it a

greater significance. That just as he gave his life out of love for us, we are to be willing to do the same. To be willing to give all that we have for the love of others.

This new commandment is meant to redefine who we are as those who follow Christ. That we are to be willing to follow him at all costs. That we are to be willing to love as he did, at all costs. For it is the sacrificial love of Jesus that is the foundation of our life and our faith. That is a reflection of the mutual love between Jesus and the Father. That is a reflection of the love that God has for us. And that by committing to this “new commandment,” that Christ’s spirit will continue to be lived out through those who follow him. Those who are the Body of Christ, embodying his love here and now.

Rarely does this new love embodied by Christ, this new love that we are asked to emulate, carry the same consequences as it did for Jesus. But sacrificial love takes many forms. More often than not, it means being open and willing to do the hard work of examining our own beliefs and perspectives and actions, and determining where and how these do or don’t—particularly don’t—intersect with God’s goals and purposes. And to be willing to change those things about ourselves that might and do get in the way of more fully living into the love exemplified by Christ.

In our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we see an example of this as applied to the early Church. How the early Church struggled with what it meant to live into its role as the Body of Christ, embodying the values, embodying the love, Christ lived. We see Peter really struggling with what the newly forming Church should look like. There were those who felt that in order to be a Christian, one first needed to be a Jew. To follow all the laws and rituals associated with Judaism. That men needed to be circumcised. That they needed to follow the kosher dietary laws. Others felt that anyone who wanted to be a Christian should be able to do so without any prerequisites. As for Peter, he was leaning toward the former position. That only those first conforming to Jewish customs should be allowed entry into the Christian community.

But God had other ideas, as God so often does. God gives Peter a vision in which a sheet is lowered from heaven with all forms of animals, birds, and other creepy-crawly things. A heavenly voice commands Peter, “kill and eat.” Peter objects on the grounds that some of the critters were not kosher. To which the heavenly voice responds “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 11.9). This happens not once, but three times, indicating that God was very insistent in his message. A message that Peter gets. He realizes that God was talking about more than just what one should eat. Peter sees with opened eyes and an open heart that the Jewish laws are no longer defining marks of God’s people. He accepts that all God’s creation is holy precisely because God made it. He accepts that all people are his sisters and brothers precisely because they are created by and are beloved of God.

When three Gentiles come to Peter seeking to become followers of Christ, Peter has a change of heart, thanks to the Spirit telling him “not to make a distinction between them and us” (Acts 11.12). Peter goes with them, and as he begins telling them the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit comes upon them. Peter proceeds to baptize them and welcome them into the community. For Peter, the meaning of Church membership—who is in and who is out—is redefined based on God’s perception, not his own human perceptions.

Peter's experience shows just how far the commandment to love one another is to extend. He demonstrates his understanding of the teachings of Jesus, that God's gift of salvation is offered for all. As Peter himself says, "If then God gave them the same gift [the Holy Spirit] that he gave us . . . who was I that I could hinder God?" (Acts 11.17).

And then there is our reading from the Revelation to John, in which John witnesses "a new heaven and a new earth." Set at some unknown point in the future, after the ultimate battle between good and evil, after the final destruction of evil, God recreates the cosmos. Not some new creation to replace the old, but the recreation of the old into the form that God originally created it, as God intended it to be from the beginning. Recreated in perfection to be a place where God and humanity will dwell together for eternity. "See, the home of God is among mortals" (Rev 21.3).

As God tells John, "see, I am making all things new" (Rev 21.5). A new creation—a re-creation—based on the laws of God. Where the foundational law is what Jesus commanded of his followers: to love one another as he loved us. A new creation in which there are no longer any barriers between God and humanity. Where all are welcomed and embraced for who they are: beloved children of God, made in his image and likeness. A new creation that is the ultimate expression of God's love for his creation. A new creation that epitomizes the mutual love between God and Christ.

All of our readings for today paint a picture of the extent of God's love for us. Of Christ's love for us. And how that love is to be lived out amongst one another. A love that was only made possible, that was only manifest, through Jesus' death to liberate us from the bonds of sin and death. A love that comes to fulfillment through Jesus' Resurrection. That through his Resurrection, all things are made new. That Christ's Resurrection changes everything. It breaks down barriers. It reveals God's deepest goals and ultimate purposes for all of creation.

In light of the Resurrection, we are made new and given a new way of being. That we are to love one another as Christ loves us. That he loves us so much that he was willing to go to the cross to give us a future. A new future. As we live into that future, we are reminded that it is not about what are we doing or what do we think needs to be done or what do we want to do, but what is God doing? And always, the answer is the same. God is doing something new. God is making all things new. Out of love for us, so that we might be the better versions of ourselves that God created us to be, and that we might have a better future. And that being the case, who are we to hinder God?