

Sunday, May 15, 2022
Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year C)

Acts 11.1-18; John 13.31-35

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/522891492830163>

(Sermon begins at about 20:40)

“Who Are We to Hinder God?”

I don't think it would come as a shock to anyone here that we have an “us” versus “them” problem. I'm not specifically talking about here at St. Gregory's. I'm speaking in general terms. That societally we have an “us” versus “them” problem. Virtually everywhere you turn, the prevailing messaging is about how “we” and those who are like us or who agree with us are good, and “they,” “them,” “those,” and others like them or who agree with them are bad. Or if not bad, at least need to be viewed with suspicion. This is most evident in the political sphere. Increasing division between liberals and conservatives, between our political parties. With each “side” having its core positions that one has to agree with in order to be considered one of “us.” Identity politics playing out in the once-sacred halls of our governmental institutions, not to mention on the nightly news, in social media, in our streets, and even around our family dinner tables. Just look at the issues occupying all these forums in recent days and weeks. Some being pretty clear-cut, like the war in Ukraine. Definitely “us” and “them”—Russia attacking Ukraine on the spurious pretense of liberating the Ukrainian people from their allegedly neo-Nazi government. Or closer to home, the vast increase in racial tension over the last couple of years. A very visible “us” versus “them” based on color of skin and stereotypes about behavior and character that supposedly go with skin color. Then there are the divisions based on deeply held beliefs, be they religious or otherwise. The most current being pro-life versus pro-choice, as we await the United States Supreme Court's impending decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. Or throughout the pandemic, those who believe the science around COVID-19 versus those who think it's all a hoax. And the related issues of requiring vaccinations or masking, boiling down to protection of public health versus perceived individual rights. And there are so many more “us” and “them” issues out there. Some that impact our society as a whole, and some that impact only a subset of our population. Divisions that are perhaps more insidious and potentially more dangerous as they often go virtually unseen by most people. Resulting in an attitude of “why should I be concerned with that if it doesn't directly affect me?”

Truth be told, none of this is new to us as a society or as a species. Sure, the specific issues may be different, but the rabid divisions have always been there. Some divisions have given rise to movements that have ultimately had a positive impact on society, such as civil rights, women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, just to name a few. None of them perfect or completely behind us, but at least signs of positive and constructive movement forward nonetheless. And some divisions that have seen bloody and destructive wars, like our two World Wars, our own Civil War, and so many localized conflicts around the globe that have ruined the lives of countless individuals, families, and communities.

We even see this “us” versus “them” attitude in the Bible. Just look at our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. The book of the Bible that tells of the early days of the developing Christian religion. While the underlying controversy is not explicitly spelled out, this passage we heard today presents God’s response to a division that threatened to undermine Christianity before it even got going. An issue that was so critical to the early Church that what we hear today is actually the second telling of the event. The first occurring just one chapter before, relating an experience Peter had. And then here today, Peter retelling that event. What was the controversy? That of the circumcised versus the uncircumcised. Or a more apt description being the division over whether converts to Christianity needed to first convert to Judaism.

As we know, all the original disciples were Jewish. They followed all the Jewish laws and practices. The only thing that distinguished them from the rest of their Jewish neighbors was that they believed that Jesus was the Messiah. In those early days as the apostles were seeking to guide the development of this new religious movement, the natural inclination was, as generally happens in organizations, particularly churches, to do what they have always done. Which meant that the early Christians, who were primarily Jewish converts, would continue to follow Jewish laws and practices. But then something started to happen. Gentiles wanted to convert to Christianity. So, the initial thought was that Gentiles needed to first convert to Judaism and follow Jewish laws and practices, and then they could become Christians. Because “we’ve always done it that way.” But Paul, who was the main person out converting the Gentiles—and incidentally, a devout, Pharisaic Jew—disagreed. What was important was that these people, the Gentiles, wanted to follow Christ. Not Judaism. So why make them convert to Judaism first. “But, we’ve never done it that way.” So two factions formed. Those in favor of conversion to Judaism, the circumcision faction, championed by Peter as the chief apostle. And those in favor of not requiring Gentiles to convert to Judaism, the uncircumcision faction, championed by Paul. The arguments got pretty heated at times, threatening the very foundation, the very existence, of the fledgling Christian movement.

So, God intervenes. He gives Peter a vision in which a sheet was lowered with all kinds of animals. God commands Peter to eat, not just once, but three times—indicating the seriousness and the divine nature of the vision. When Peter objects, because some of the animals are unclean according to Jewish law, God chastises him: “What God has made clean, you must not profane.” That everything God has made is good in God’s eyes. See the creation story in Genesis. After the initial vision in Chapter 10, a servant of Cornelius the Centurion, who is most certainly a Gentile, comes to Peter with a message that Cornelius and his household want to become Christians. Peter connects the dots. He gets the message. That God’s vision does not just apply to food. It applies to people, as well. The implication being that if all people are created by God, why do Gentiles have to jump through Jewish hoops, including circumcision, to become Christians. As a result, Cornelius becomes the first recorded Gentile convert at the hands of Peter, now formerly of the circumcision faction. In today’s reading, Peter is confronted by some from the circumcision faction, wanting him to justify why he has baptized Cornelius and his family, why he has dared to eat with them. In response, Peter conveys his experience and verification of what God meant by it. Verified that it applied to people as well, when the Holy Spirit, a gift from God, fell upon the new Gentile converts. You can’t get better confirmation than that. As Peter concludes his defense, “Who was I that I could hinder God?”

Of course, if Peter had really thought about what Jesus taught, and particularly Jesus' final instructions to the disciples before his death, God's intervention in the matter might not have been necessary. Our Gospel reading for today is the summation of Jesus' teachings and those final instructions: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you shall love one another." Now, on the surface, this doesn't sound like anything new. Jewish law is filled with commandments about love. The most famous being the Great Commandment: to love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind; and to love your neighbor as yourself. The Jewish law says it. Jesus himself said it. So what's so new about this "new commandment" to love one another? The key is in the second part of what Jesus commands: "Just as I have loved you."

When Jesus said these words, when he gave this new commandment, he had just washed the disciples' feet. That's what he was referring to. That what he had just done was a radical example of the kind of love he was talking about. That simple act of footwashing turned conventional wisdom on its head. It redefined everything they knew about social status, power, prestige, and privilege. In the ancient Near East, servants commonly washed their masters' feet. But here, Jesus, the master, has just washed the feet of those considered "below" him in social status. This was not just an act of kindness. As with everything Jesus did, there were far greater implications. This action was merely symbolic of a far-reaching, transformative love in action. As one commentator notes, "Familiar as it is, Jesus' 'new commandment' is much more than a humdrum call to kindness. On the contrary, it's a summons to a distinctive, subversive, surprising form of love, bridging social divides between 'above' and 'below,' 'insider' and 'outsider,' 'clean' and 'unclean.'"¹ And I would add between "us" and "them." It was a form of love that was confirmed for Peter in his vision in which God essentially did the same thing: proclaiming that our limited perspectives and understandings are not what God intends. Not what God intended from the beginning when he proclaimed all he created as being very good.

As human beings with the capability of independent thought, with the capacity for freewill, we will always have our own unique ways of viewing what goes on around us. At times, that will be different from, even in conflict with, how others view those same situations or conditions. What our scripture readings for today provide is a new way of understanding our differences. A new lens to view the world around us. A new way of responding to what we see and experience. That means recognizing it's not about "us" versus "them." It's not about creating division. It's not about becoming so entrenched in our own positions. It's not about vilifying those who have different perspectives. It's not about shutting down the other. It's about finding ways to be "us" together. It's about working to keep everyone at the table. It's about keeping dialogue going. Because when we can do that, we generally find there is some common ground, there is common purpose. And out of that we can, if we are open, find a new way. Not that we even really need to find a new way. Scripture shows us the way.

As we see in God's vision to Peter, the key is allowing God to be in the conversation. Something we too often forget. Instead, we attempt to speak for God. With both sides speaking for God, that never ends well. Instead, we need to allow God to speak for God. To allow God to speak for all of us. To allow God to show us that all he has created is clean and good and worthy of love. Just like God did with the early Church, when "us" versus "them" thinking nearly destroyed

Christ's work. All because they forgot his core teaching. The commandment to love one another as he loved them. As he loves us.

In an increasingly contentious, divided nation and world, the only way we are going to survive is if we banish "us" versus "them" thinking, positions, and rhetoric, and instead find ways to come together. As the Body of Christ in the world, it is our job to heed God's message to Peter to not call profane that which God has made; to follow the new commandment Jesus gave for all his followers to love one another in the radically transformative way that Christ loves us. To allow the beautiful glory of God to shine through us. This is what God desires for us, this is what God commands of us, to bring about his purposes. And who are we to hinder God?

¹ "Love is the Mark: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Easter 5," SALT, May 10, 2022.

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/5/14/new-commandment-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-5>.