

“As I Have Loved, You Should Love”
John 13:31-35 and Acts 11:1-18
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In something I read this week, I was reminded of that quote that says, “never put a period where God puts a comma.” It came up in something that I was reading as part of my sermon prep, and it stuck with me because it relates to the message that comes out of our Scripture readings for today. It’s also a great way to summarize what God seems to be saying to us in the Scriptures that we’ve been listening to throughout this whole Easter season. On Easter, God raised Jesus from the dead and what we have been seeing over these last weeks is that Jesus’s resurrection is like a giant comma that gives us hope and assurance that there is more when we may think that we have arrived at or are stuck with period. In this Easter season we have seen how endings can become new beginnings. We have seen how failures aren’t final, and we have seen how Jesus’s physical departure- which might not have been perceived as a welcome change initially- opened up a whole new way for his disciples to know and follow him as Shepherd through the person and presence of the Holy Spirit. Each week the pattern has been there. Things appear to be one way, but as it turns out there’s something more. This morning, as we look at the Scriptures from John and Acts, the similar pattern emerges again. This is what you thought, but, wait. There’s more.

Our first Scripture reading was from the Gospel of John so let’s begin there. The text takes us back to that night in the upper room when Jesus and his disciples gathered to share the last Passover meal that they would have together before he was arrested and killed. John describes how Jesus took on the role of a servant and washed the disciples’ feet that night, and after he had done that, he gave them a new commandment. The new commandment was a command to love each other in the same way that he had loved them, and by washing their feet, he had given them an example of what he meant. Loving each other as Jesus loved would mean more than just saying some words or caring for each other when it was convenient or easy. Loving as Jesus loved would involve humility, service, and sacrifice.

When we get to the book of Acts, we read about the beginnings of the church. In Acts 2 we read how Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, preached to the Jews who had come to Jerusalem from all over for the Pentecost festival, and on that day, we’re told that about 3000 people put their faith in Jesus and a community began to form. Acts also tells us that the community was characterized by the exact thing that Jesus had said his disciples would be characterized by. In the Upper Room, when he gave them the command to love each other as he had loved them, he had also said, everyone will know you are my disciples if you love each other the way I have loved you, and that’s exactly what they did. Acts says that “all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.” If we were going to give Peter and the early church a grade for how well they had understood and applied Jesus’s instructions about how to love as he loved, we could give them an A+. They had grasped the concepts of humility, and service, and sacrifice as they shared their possessions and took care of the least among them, and it was just as they had gotten this part down, that the risen Jesus spoke to Peter through a vision and by the Holy Spirit to say, “there’s more.”

The story that we heard in Acts 11, was Peter’s retelling of events that are described in Acts 10. Cornelius was a God-fearing Gentile, but he didn’t know Jesus and he hadn’t heard the good news that Jesus had come to bring salvation to him. That message had not yet been preached to him because Peter and the other believers didn’t understand yet themselves that the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ wasn’t God’s gift for the Jews only. It was God’s gift for all people – including the Gentiles who had

previously been considered outsiders. It was because they were considered outsiders that we hear Peter defending himself against criticism at the beginning of Acts 11. The apostles and believers in Judea were uncomfortable with the fact that Peter had crossed forbidden racial and ethnic lines and that he had entered and eaten in the home of a Gentile. Only a few days earlier, Peter himself would have condemned others for doing the same, but his mind had changed after receiving a vision from God and after witnessing with his own eyes how the Holy Spirit had been poured out on men and women that he previously thought were on the outside of what God was doing.

As it turned out, God's plan and God's mission was even wider and more far-reaching than Peter and the earliest church community realized, and this revelation that God's love and gift of salvation extended to the Gentiles was the "more" that they hadn't seen coming. It was becoming clear that following Jesus was going to take them to places that they never thought they would go -like Peter discovered when we ended up in Cornelius's home. And it was becoming clear that this new community that was forming around Jesus was going to be much more inclusive than they first realized. All kinds of different people of different races, and backgrounds, and social and economic status were going to become a part of it, and they would learn to love as Jesus loved people that they never expected to be in community with. It was all very surprising, and it would be challenging to live in to the "more" that God was revealing, but it was also exciting and wonderful to realize that the Spirit of God was moving and no one could stop what the Spirit was doing. "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" Peter asked. The Spirit would not stop pursuing and drawing all people toward Jesus and into relationship with God- with or without Peter. With or without anyone.

As we think about a message that we might take with us from these Scriptures today, there is certainly an obvious lesson and a challenge about the expansive and inclusive nature of God's love and the gospel. The good news that God has provided a Savior in Jesus Christ and that through Christ sins are forgiven and the gift of eternal life is offered is good news for every person. Unfortunately, building up walls that divide us from our fellow humans and coming up with ways to exclude others is something that comes naturally to us, and Jesus came to break down those barriers and to knit us back together into one new humanity that is united through him. This means that we, as followers of Jesus, are called to love across and beyond all the different barriers and boundaries that exist in our communities and culture. We are called to bear the message that everyone, no matter who they are, can be loved and *is* loved by God and we are called to invite all people to believe in Jesus and put their trust in him. There is no one who should be excluded- by our words or our actions- from receiving God's love and the invitation to respond to God's love through us.

This is likely not a new revelation to us in the way that it was a totally new revelation for Peter to discover that God wanted to include the Gentiles. We've heard this before, but it's always good to examine ourselves and to ask the Spirit to examine our hearts because we are prone to doing the things that we know we shouldn't and, also, to failing to do the things that we know we should. If we look inside carefully and honestly, we might discover that we are guilty of holding some people at a distance, or treating some people differently, or of withholding Jesus's love from those we have deemed unworthy of receiving it. If these things are true, it is right to confess our failures and to turn from them. I think there is something more for us here today, though, and it has to do with the idea that there was more to God's mission than Peter and the apostles and earliest disciples first realized.

Today we know that there are so many churches that are not what they once were in terms of the number of members or the number of ministries and activities that they have going on. Even Lakewood looks different than it did 30 and 40 years ago. I have seen the photos of the Lakewood children's Sunday school classes that had 25 children in each grade level- maybe every grade level didn't but there are at least that many in the photos of the kindergarten class that I've seen. It can feel like the church is going backward, or becoming irrelevant, and there is real concern about what will become of

the church and local churches especially, but what we hear in the Scriptures this morning is that God is on a mission that can't be stopped. The Spirit of God is still at work and moving around in this world to draw people to Jesus and to keep building this community that is made up of people with all kinds of differences who are united in and through Jesus Christ. That is the church and God is still building it, and as long as God is still building the church then there is more for us as followers of Jesus to do.

Sometimes our imaginations can be dull, and sometimes we may find it hard to visualize something more than what we have done before or what we are doing now, but what we hear in the Scripture this morning is that with Jesus the possibility of more than what we see or understand right now always exists. Peter never imagined how the early church was going to expand and grow and never imagined all the people that it would include, and it just might be that we haven't imagined those kinds of things either. Maybe we haven't thought about all the ways that God might expand our ministry and maybe we haven't yet considered or discovered the people that the Spirit of God may lead us to reach with the good news about Jesus. What if the Spirit leads us to send teams of missionaries to love and serve in countries outside of the US? What if the Spirit has planned for us to share good news with the refugee and immigrant population that live right here in our zip code? I don't know what the *more* might be that God has in store for us, but it will be difficult to discover it if we aren't willing to be obedient and courageous like Peter was.

Imagine how the story might have been different if Peter had not responded to the vision and trusted the message that he received. He did resist at first. He resisted the vision 3 times saying, "no, I would never eat anything unclean," but when the Spirit told him to go with the men to Cornelius's home he went and soon the message that God did not show partiality became clear to him. If Peter had continued to resist, God still would have gotten the message about Jesus to Cornelius and the gospel would have still reached the Gentiles because God cannot be stopped, but Peter would have missed out on participating. He would have missed the chance to bring Jesus's love to Cornelius and to share Jesus's love and the gospel with so many others.

We may not know what more God has for us here at Lakewood, but we don't want to miss it do we? God is still at work and still reaching out to the people that God loves in this community and all around the world, and God isn't going to stop reaching out until every person that can be reached has been reached. For as long as God is reaching out to the people that God loves, there will be things that we can do, people that we can love, and ways that we can participate. Let's not miss any opportunity to love more people more and to make Jesus known to every person to whom we are sent. Amen.