

Easter 5, May 19, 2022 (Jo 13:31-35; Acts 11:1-18; Rev 21:1-6; Ps 148)

Today's readings contain two commands which could have changed the world. They *might* have. They still *might* change the world.

From Acts we heard the story of the Apostle Peter, a strict Jew, bound by Jewish laws of ritual cleanliness and purity. One day around noon, he was on the roof of the home of Simon the Tanner in Joppa. He was hungry, and while he waited for a meal to be prepared, he dreamed. In his vision he saw a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners.

The sheet contained all kinds of animals. Some were "safe" for the Jews to eat. But others were completely taboo, including seafood that didn't swim (like shrimp), birds of prey, and animals that didn't have cloven hoofs and chew their cud. All of these were *unclean* according to the Jewish law.

Then a voice told him, "**Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.**" --*What was God thinking??* How could Peter go against centuries of written and oral tradition? How could he eat something *everyone* knew was unclean??

Of course Peter refused. "**Surely not, Lord!**" he said. "**I've never eaten anything impure or unclean.**" The voice spoke again: "**Don't call anything impure that God has made clean!**"

Twice more Peter saw the vision and heard the voice, and he still didn't believe it could have been from God. Then all doubt was removed when three gentiles—definitely *unclean*—came looking for him, sent by their master Cornelius, who was a Roman centurion—definitely a gentile.

They told Peter about Cornelius, who worshiped the God of the Jews. In a vision he'd seen Peter the Jew come to his home to tell his extended family about Jesus: a vision of a Jew who followed laws of ritual purity gathered for table fellowship with gentiles—who were ritually unclean.

*What was God thinking?* wondered Peter. Well, it's clear what God was thinking. **Get up, Peter. Kill and eat. I've made it all clean, so don't call it impure. And I'm sending you to the gentiles, so get up and go!**

That was one of the commands that had the potential to change history. The other actually happened first. At his Last Supper, Jesus gave his disciples a *new commandment*: **Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.**

These words were spoken by our Lord just after he'd washed the feet of his disciples. All of them. Including Peter, who would deny him. And Judas Iscariot. The last words before today's gospel are, **After receiving the bread from Jesus, Judas immediately went out. And it was night.**

Knowing he would be denied and betrayed, Jesus washed the feet of the offending disciples—friends who had followed him for years. And then he told all who were present to *love one another, just as he had loved them.*

Just as he had consistently loved *all* God's people, including all kinds of sinners. Jesus reached out again and again to those whom Jewish law considered unclean, outcast, or unworthy. He crossed over lines of nationality, gender, class, and health. His love accepted all people.

Such love was unheard of. That love itself was *unacceptable* to the Jews of Jesus' day. When Peter explained his visions to the Christian leaders in Jerusalem, they were astonished: **So God has granted *even the gentiles* repentance unto life!**

In the past century, Christian churches have come to a new understanding about issues that once seemed perfectly clear. The Bible condoned slavery, but we know it's wrong. The Bible boasted of harems for the wealthy, but we know *that's* wrong.

The Bible clearly states that women should keep their heads covered and be silent in church, but we've moved beyond that in our own understanding. Could there be other *truths* we're "sure about" that might also be wrong?

Jesus' *new commandment* was, **Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.** That dying love of Jesus, which gives us life without death, reached out across all sorts of boundaries to embrace everyone. That includes *us*, unworthy as we are to receive his own body and blood.

*Love* isn't a warm fuzzy feeling. It's an attitude, a commitment, a *verb of action* seeking the well-being of others. *All* others. Even those we may not like. *Especially* those who are different from us and in need of love.

When Jesus told his disciples to **love one another**, just as *he* had loved *them*, I'll bet they were surprised and overwhelmed. To love "just as Jesus loved" meant putting their lives on the line. It meant risk—they might be arrested, tortured, even put to death. Surely God wouldn't ask that of his own children, would he? But he did.

That's what his own Son, God-in-the-flesh, did.

When God told Peter to **kill and eat**, I'm betting Peter's stomach was tied in knots. *How can I, Lord? It's wrong! It's always been wrong! At least, that's what the Law says.* But God knew better. Indeed, God had always known better. His children were just beginning to understand that.

Today we don't put our lives on the line if we worship and follow Jesus. There are so many different varieties of Christians, you can practically decide what you want to believe and then find a fellowship to join that agrees with you.

But if the Bible clearly says what *I* think it's saying here, we'd better think twice about our convictions of "who's in/who's out" and what it means to *love as Jesus loved*.

We've been given our marching orders. Jesus calls us to demonstrate *his* love to the world so everyone will know we're his disciples. That means loving those who deny us, betray us, rub us the wrong way, accuse us falsely, make us feel small.

That means loving those whose life style is different from ours, those who dress differently, those whose background is something "ethnic." That means giving up our judgments and complaints, and forgiving others as Jesus has forgiven us.

As Jesus *forgives* us. Remember the Supper, when we receive the words of promise: **my body given for you; my blood of the new covenant, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.** YOU ARE FORGIVEN! So go out to love and forgive others, just as Jesus loves and forgives us. **Tx be to God!**