

May 15, 2022

The Fifth Sunday after Easter

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Make new friends, keep the old. One is silver and the other gold. A circle is round, it has no end. That's how long I will be your friend.

The words of this sweet song, sung around the campfire by Girl Scouts since the 60's, were taken from an 1860's poem by Joseph Parr. They remind us that we may find value in all things— new and the old. And that there is a continuum of relationship that arises out of love. Yet sometimes the old and the new come into conflict, and we may find ourselves like the Jewish Christians in today's lesson from the Book of Acts, trying to make sense of what has been, and what is becoming.

There is a thread of New running through our lessons this morning. Jesus offers a new commandment, God is making all things new, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, the lives of Cornelius and his family have been made new. God has broken in, and in each of these moments, there is an uncomfortable, yet hopeful move from what has been, the old, to what is to be, the new.

Navigating the fine line between new and old has been the eternal challenge of the institution and the people that are the church. It is a challenge we who follow Jesus continue to navigate. For both the new & the old have their place; their value. We need them both. Often they inform one another, and taken together they can give us a fullness of understanding that maybe can't be found when we sit only in one lane.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Peter has embraced his calling to spread the good news in Christ to all people. The Torah, the rituals and religious laws of Judaism have defined and informed his life as a Jew, just as Jesus' words, actions, and commandments now define and inform his life as a disciple. He is of both worlds. We can imagine how challenging it could be, to navigate the space between what has always been, and what is now becoming. For it is something the church has been challenged by since its inception, even to the present day.

With little interest for the gentiles who have accepted God's word, the circumcised believers — Jews who have come to believe in Jesus — condemn Peter, not for baptizing the gentiles, but for breaking the kosher laws that forbid the clean to eat with the unclean, the uncircumcised. With this complaint, they inadvertently put up barriers that separate. Although they believe in Christ, they still hold sacred the rituals and rules of Judaism. Maintaining purity and food laws as tradition and practice is extremely important to their identity, for it is all they have ever known.

Peter's response is not one of defense or argument. Rather, he tells of his own divine encounter with God, and the vision in which God spoke new things: Out of this holy experience Peter heard God speaking :

Do not call profane what God has made clean.

Do not make a distinction between others and yourselves.

And, recognizing that the Holy Spirit gave the gentiles the same gift it had given them, when they believed, was compelled to ask himself: "Who was I that I could hinder God?"

In that moment, Peter realizes it is not his, or their, place to get in the way of God's leading, of God's making things new. Even if uncomfortable, even if it means letting go of ideas or practices or ways of being they have always known.

Within our own Episcopal church, we have had such moments as Peter. When the issue of women's ordination came up in the early 1970's, there were those who stood firmly against it, based upon interpretation of scripture and established tradition. But as if the Holy Spirit had poured down its presence upon them, there were also many who called that question for themselves: Who are we that we could hinder God? If, they asked, this is where the spirit is leading, who are we to get in God's way. Might God be expanding our understanding of what it means to be church, and of who is to be included?

While there was never universal agreement, it seems the church remembered that Jesus came for and called all people, never excluding anyone, for any reason.

Fast forward to 2022. At this year's general convention — the conference that happens every three years and at which governance decisions are made for the church by our elected officials, a resolution is on the table that calls for the requirement that one must be a baptized christian in order to receive communion be removed from the book of common prayer, thus allowing priests to openly communicate all people and to extend the invitation to the table freely, followed then by the invitation into formation..

As you might expect, there are strong feelings on both sides of the issue. Those opposed to the change have a deep theological respect and understanding for the history of baptism, an act that signals new life and faith in Jesus, which normally is followed by communion. Those in favor of the theology of the open table, see this requirement as a barrier to welcome at Christ's table, the sharing of bread and wine Jesus shared generously, without discretion, or qualification. We will all have to wait and see what the outcome of this conversation will be, as we navigate the road between what has been and what may be.

It is easy to become attached to our rituals and traditions just as the circumcised believers did. While it may seem that our tradition and theology might justify the continuation of the rules that some see as excluding or set apart; we must ask: what if God is working something new in our church? What if God is calling us to consider that we don't know it all, that we don't have all the answers, and that removing barriers to inclusion, participation and belonging is the new thing we are called to do?

Jesus models for us what it is to both honor our traditions and practices while we also look with fresh eyes upon the rules, rituals, and practices we love.

As Judas leaves them to betray Christ, he speaks hope into their listening, the hope of his glory to come, and then, follows with a new commandment — calling them to love deeper. They are being asked by Jesus, before his arrest, crucifixion and death, to love one another (including Judas, and including the “outsiders” they will encounter after he is gone) as he loved them. In that present moment, honoring his command might have seemed easy, simple.

As Jesus dies on the cross, the simplicity of loving becomes complicated. The ultimate gift of love, God's son crucified that we might have life eternally, calls us into a new reality, one that demands that we who have been loved, share and exude that love to each other.

We all want to love and be loved. More often than not, we would like to give or receive this love on our own terms, with our own conditions. This is the struggle Peter is facing as he is drawn in by the spirit to bestow god's love freely. Rather than focusing on Jesus' new commandment to love one another, the circumcised believers are limiting who this love is for, because of beliefs they have been taught and held, and know to always be true.

With his words, Peter shows them that it is not for them, or us, to decide how narrow the net of God's love is to be cast. When Jesus said, Love one another, he did not add any conditional statements. We are the ones who love conditionally: when it feels good, when it benefits us, when it is easy. We love people who are just like us, often disallowing ourselves the opportunity to love those different than we are. Somehow, we would rather be filled with anxiety and fear over our difference than find our way through it to experience the beauty of what we have in common.

This amazing love of Christ is the love that has the power to transform us. It is the love that has the power to bring forth new things, to open the doors of the kingdom of God wide open so that people all people, not just a select chosen few, might know God's love, and then be given the space in which to live it out openly.

Martin Luther King Jr once said, “Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.” We might add that Love is the only force capable of transforming the old into the new.

Here, on this 5th Sunday of Easter, we are steeped in the glory and hope of Christ's resurrection. We are reminded again that our call is to love one another, just as Jesus loved us, as best we can, as much as we can. And we are reminded through Peter's story, that expressing that love often demands that we must embrace the new, even as we hold tight to the old.

As the song goes, “a circle is round, it has no end” and that is how long Jesus will be our friend. Honor what has been, embrace what is to come, navigate the journey with as much love as you can muster.