

King of Glory Lutheran Church

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Year C: Easter 5: John 13:31-35 & Acts 11:1-18

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Acts 11:1-18

11 Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³ saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" ⁴ Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵ "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. ⁶ As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷ I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸ But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' ¹⁰ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹ At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹² The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³ He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴ he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' ¹⁵ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷ 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?" ¹⁸ When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

John 13:31-35

³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

These last few weeks I've been keeping track of fire news. This last week the fire that has been raging for a month in New Mexico came near Taos. I've only been to Taos once but I have good memories of that beautiful place.

Several years ago a group of students from the campus ministry I served at the University of Northern Colorado drove down to Taos, New Mexico and worked for a week on a Habitat for Humanity house over spring break. The house was almost finished when we arrived and so we spent the week painting and mopping floors and cleaning up the work site.

One day we were invited to lunch at the Habitat office. When we arrived we met Chrystal, the woman who would be moving into the house we were working on. She told us all about herself and her three children. We learned about the sweat equity hours she was putting into her future home, the three jobs she was working, and what her children were most looking forward to in their new home.

And while we got to know Chrystal, we ate a meal that she prepared for us. It was a spicy taco salad that she had made from chiles she had picked and dried and crushed herself. She made this meal for us from the little that she had to make us feel welcome and to show her appreciation for our help.

That day we were Chrystal's guests as she fed us and welcomed us. That day we heard the story of someone who had been a stranger. That day we gathered around Chrystal's table and we became friends. I have experienced this many times, that when people gather around a table together, strangers often become friends. Maybe you have had this experience as well.

Today in our reading from the book of the Acts of the Apostles we hear a story about food and table fellowship. In this reading from Acts, Peter is in trouble with his fellow Christians, the apostles and believers, for hanging out and eating with the "wrong" crowd. It went against Jewish law for Peter to eat with Gentiles, the label for people who were not Jewish.

When the church was new, Christianity was a small, radical group of Jews. Jesus was a Jew. And the first Christians were Jews who followed Jewish law. As time passed a debate began about who could be a Christian and who could not.

Almost immediately, there were people who were not Jews who wanted to be baptized and join the Christian community. This created questions about non-Jewish converts. What to do about people who had always been off-limits in the Jewish world? Did they have to become Jewish to be Christian? In order to be a Christian did you have to follow Jewish law? How wide would and could God's circle, God's family extend?

So that's why we find Peter today, the man we know as the leader of the church, having to explain why he sat down and ate unclean food with the Gentiles, who were an unclean people, outsiders, and why he shared the gospel with them and baptized them.

Peter tells his story, how he was called to a man's house to share the gospel message through a vision saying, "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 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 stand in God's way?"

"Who was I that I could stand in God's way," Peter said. And so Peter, recognizing the Holy Spirit, ate with the Gentiles, and shared the gospel message of Jesus Christ.

Seeing the Holy Spirit move and work among strangers, Peter understood that God's love was for all people – not just one select group of people who all looked the same, spoke the same language and ate the same kinds of food.

God called Peter to risk loving people who were different, people who he wouldn't normally choose to hang out with, people who challenged him with new things, people whose stories he didn't know and were unfamiliar to him. So Peter sat and ate the "wrong" food with the "wrong" people, with the outsiders, with strangers. He formed relationships with people who he never would have dreamed God's love would include.

In our gospel reading from John today we hear Jesus give his disciples, and you and I, a new commandment, "Love one another." And so we have to ask ourselves, what kind of love is this? What does it mean that we are to love one another as Jesus has loved us?

It sounds simple enough. Maybe for a moment it even makes you feel warm and fuzzy inside as you hear this commandment, "love one another." But notice, Jesus doesn't make this commandment very long or offer a complicated set of rules to go with it. He doesn't pass out a manual on who to love and how to love them. Instead he says, "Just as I have loved you, love one another."

It's as simple as that and as hard as that. We are to follow Jesus' example of love and love one another.

Jesus teaches us that love is not meant to be lived out by rules and restrictions and categories, and yet, if we are honest, we do it all the time. We attempt to define love, put restrictions on it, and hold onto it as though we might run out of it. By our thoughts, our words, and our actions we decide who deserves love and who is too difficult to love. Sometimes we make snap decisions about other people without ever even knowing their story or their name.

Mother Theresa once said, "If you judge people, you have no time to love them."

Jesus said, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Love by Jesus' definition is not a romantic love or a friendly love and it is not about loving people who will love you back. This commandment to love is given right after Judas leaves to go betray Jesus and just before Peter will deny knowing Jesus three times.

Jesus reminds us today and shows us by his very life and death and resurrection that His love is self-sacrificing, unconditional, forgiving and never ending. And this love is for everyone. God's love does not make distinctions, does not seek to divide or exclude. God's love invites all people to one table, to one family.

Of course, this doesn't mean that loving other people is easy, we all know that. But God has not left us to follow this commandment all on our own. This commandment to love one another would be impossible without the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Remember what Peter said, "And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

God has given us the Holy Spirit. And by the gift of the Holy Spirit we don't have to trust in our own understanding, knowledge or strength. God has given the Holy Spirit to you and to me that we might know God's love, full and complete and unconditional. Love that has been given to you and me that we might know God's abundant love and share that love with one another.

So when have you loved another person this past week?

And when have you failed to love another person this past week?

God brings people into our life each day, people we know and people we don't, people we want to love and people who we're not sure we can love. Each day, we have an opportunity to follow Jesus' command and love one another.

"Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Loving our neighbor and sharing the gospel means that we are called not only to invite people to our table but we are called to go out, and be a guest at someone else's table.

When we gather around new tables we may find new food but more importantly we will meet strangers who might become friends. And at those new tables we can grow in love, have our assumptions challenged, and learn new stories.

I hope you find a new table to gather at this week, or listen to one new story or learn one new name. Blessings on your journey following Jesus and loving one another.

Amen.