

Sermon Text – Sunday, May 18, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Revelation 21:1-6; 2nd Reading: John 13:31-35
Scripture for Message: Acts 11:1-18 “All Things New”

In this reading from Acts we learn that Peter returned to Jerusalem and is called to face a delegation of “the circumcised believers.” Peter, it seems, has some explaining to do – he has violated traditions by entering the homes of and eating with Gentiles – the unclean. Peter was greatly affected by the fact that this family of Jesus’ followers had criticized him, he wanted therefore to help them understand that this was from God.

I wonder though if to do that, he had to break down the stigma regarding who or what was clean and unclean. That is what he needed to get from the vision that he recounts to those who criticize him. Three times a voice from heaven tells him that “what God has made clean, you must not call profane.” That command was not only directed to what Peter should kill and eat but also to whom Peter should eat with.

Peter tells this delegation that not only did he, a Jew, receive a vision from heaven but also Cornelius, a Roman Centurion and Gentile, had a vision. It seems that visions come to whomever God chooses. As Peter accompanies the “brothers” to Cornelius’ home he learns of Cornelius’ vision. Once there, Peter begins to give them the message of the Gospel, and the Holy Spirit falls on the members of Cornelius’ household just as it had upon the circumcised believers in the beginning. Peter tells these circumcised believers what he believes, “If God gave them [the uncircumcised] the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” These are indeed reasons to praise God. If those considered unworthy can be approached by God and saved – we should praise the Lord, all day long.

What the believers proclaimed from Peter’s account is that “God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.” They realize that repentance is an act of God’s grace. Repentance is more than “feeling-sorry-for my sins” and more than an individual taking that first step toward Christ. Repentance is the divine gift of being able to be turned toward the truth. In Christ, God has turned toward us and “granted” or given us repentance.

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When the circumcised believers summoned Peter to Jerusalem to give an accounting of actions they felt were against traditions, Peter brought them to a moment of conversion. This wasn't a fight between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians but more like a family feud among the disciples. Peter's vision challenges the newly forming church to expand its image of who belongs in the family of God. This feud meant that the earliest followers of Jesus had to rethink the importance of traditions and certain requirements for holiness. God was working in new ways and that required a change in the hearts and minds of people who were stuck in what, in their opinion, had always been the way of the Lord. In those days Gentiles, the uncircumcised, were considered profane but Peter's vision showed that God was reconciling all the world to God's family "making all things new – the first things have passed away."

I wonder if the growing pains they were experiencing at that time can help us understand a similar struggle going on in the church today. There seems to be a feud between traditionalists and those who can see a new way for the church today. "There is a fine balance between remaining true to our roots and at the same time being open to new growth."¹ We must consider what traditions block the acceptance of outsiders. We need to reflect on who the outsiders are, the ones stigmatized and excluded from worship because they might not be like us.

As we talk about breaking down stigma, we remind ourselves of what Jesus said to the disciples, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you... By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35) Jesus is speaking of unconditional love, and yet there is work to love. Breaking down stigma related to mental health is not simple, it requires a great deal of love that is built out of working to understand another's journey. Breaking down barriers that we have built up will not be easy, but the church must be open to hearing, "See, I am making all things new!" (Rev. 21:5).

¹ Marianne Blickenstaff. "Fifth Sunday of Easter; Acts 11:1-18; Connecting the Reading with the World" *Connections Year C, Volume 2, Lent through Pentecost*. Eds. Green, Long, Powery & Rigby. WJK. 2018. Print. 251-253

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Who or what would we consider profane today? Are they the ones with addictions, those who may be unhoused or unemployed because they are neurodiverse or challenged to fit into normal society? What is normal anyway and who sets the standards? Consider who the people we'd like to convert and then think about our reasons why.

The story from Acts and even the readings from John's Gospel and from the book of Revelation speak of conversion and change. We can simply take the story from Acts as just a story of how Peter experienced a "conversion" from one who strictly followed Jewish purity laws to someone who now realized that God makes no distinction between Gentile and Jew. We can take the simple interpretation that this is a story of how Cornelius household, a household of Gentiles, were converted to followers of the way. We can, however, go deeper into our understanding of this story. Maybe this is a story about us!

What if conversion in Acts meant the conversion of the church – the whole body of Christ. Conversion from accommodating and adjusting to society's current standards or even to the church's current standards to the "new thing" God is doing in our world. In John's Gospel it is God doing the glorifying not humankind and the something new is a new commandment to simply love – love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. Notice that the "new" in this commandment changes things from "love your neighbor as you love yourself" to "love one another as I have loved you" that is a clear distinction that makes love wider and less convenient. Then we read in the book of Revelation that it is God who creates a new heaven and a new earth coming down out of heaven. It is God, the one seated on the throne, who said, "See, I am making all things new."

Sometimes we get it wrong when we think about conversion. Of course we want to see unbelievers converted to followers of Christ. We frequently fail to see the whole picture and we sometimes fail to realize that it is God who grants repentance as an act of grace. We continue to want to pick and choose who gets accepted and who is welcome. We often feel as if it is our job to convert sinners – but who are we?

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One question that many generations of churches have struggled with is who should be admitted to our table. Jesus answered that question for his disciples when he washed the feet of his disciples, including Judas and served the bread and cup to Judas before sending him out to do what he must do. Both old and new testaments in our bible teach us that God will welcome all nations to the banquet table – all nations will be included in God's promise. The thing for us to understand is it is not up to us to figure out how that happens it is a God thing.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) answered the question about who is welcome decades ago – all are welcome. I wonder if we have, over time, narrowed the definition of all. Some churches have “by-laws” that tend to exclude some people, some churches consider certain lifestyles an abomination or at the very least less than desirable to associate with in times of communion. I wonder if some have become more like the Pharisees and the “circumcised delegation” than we care to admit.

So that leads me back to the question – who or what do we consider profane, and how do we break that stigma. Not only the stigma of mental illness but also the negativity associated with judging others. We live in a culture where people can hide behind Facebook posts throwing out negative comments without having to face the person or group of persons they are commenting on. People can say anything they want these days without fear of repercussion because comments are masked by social media – making it seem like our opinions don't matter. But guess what they do matter, our words matter, what we comment on or say about others matters. And it not only matters to you personally but when you include the church in your negativity it matters to everyone sitting around you. Peter learned that in his vision from heaven, what Peter thought was profane were creatures that God has created and what God had made clean, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

There are many times in scripture where we hear the words “judge not” because ultimately Jesus is the judge, Jesus is the reaper of the harvest not anyone of us. When we debate about who is welcome, who is worthy, or who is “less than” we are putting

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ourselves in the place of Jesus and we become like the Pharisees and false prophets that Jesus warned against.

Bottom line is this church, rather than excluding others must figure out how we can help others turn toward God and accept the gifts God offers without forcing tradition, rules and regulations, or our own expectations of worthiness on them. We don't know what is in the heart of another and it is not our job to try to discover those hidden things. Our job as church people and followers of Christ is to love as Jesus loved and to let God be God.