

Love Without Distinctions

Acts 11:1-18 *“The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.”*

John 13:31-35 *I give you a new commandment, that you 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.”*

Our reading from the Acts of the Apostles finds Peter, leader of the church in Jerusalem, reporting to his community events that were narrated in the previous chapter. Peter’s report is brief and leaves out some interesting and important details in the story itself. Let me summarize the story.

A Roman centurion named Cornelius has a vision in Caesarea. Cornelius is described as a man who “fears God,” prays sincerely and regularly, and gives generously to the needs of others. A divine messenger appears and tells him that his prayers have been heard and his generosity noticed by God. Cornelius is told to send for a man named Peter in the city of Joppa.

As Cornelius’ messengers are approaching Joppa, Peter is praying up on the roof of the house where he is staying. He becomes hungry and falls into a trance. He sees heaven open and something like a large sheet descending, filled with all kinds of animals. A voice says: “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” Peter, being a devout Jew, resists. “Lord, I have never eaten anything profane or unclean.” Peter is very strict about religious dietary laws. The voice responds: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” This happens three times, and the dream or vision is over.

While Peter is trying to figure out what happened and what it meant, the messengers from Cornelius arrive. They tell Peter what happened to Cornelius, and Peter sets out the next day with them. Arriving at Cornelius’ house, Peter says, “Look, I’m not even supposed to be here! I’m a Jew; you are a Gentile. This is totally against what we believe. BUT God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So here I am. Why did you send for me?”

Cornelius tells Peter his story. Peter probably took a little time to let it all sink in. Then he says, “I truly understand now that God shows no partiality, but anyone anywhere who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.” Peter then talks with Cornelius about Jesus Christ, who he was, what he did, what happened to him. While Peter is speaking, God’s spirit falls upon everyone in the house. The devout Jews who had

come with Peter are dumbfounded that God’s spirit has been given to Gentiles. Peter ends up baptizing Cornelius and his household.

This is what Peter has to report when he gets back to Jerusalem. It is a huge deal! In the view of those in Jerusalem, Peter has completely disregarded what is religiously right and proper. They see themselves as Jews who follow Jesus the Jew, and the idea that Gentiles are being included in what God is doing is deeply disturbing. The thought that God’s spirit could be present in and with those who don’t share our particular beliefs or practices is a shock. It means we don’t control who God is or how God works.

Peter has come to a whole new understanding, which he tries to share with the very skeptical Jerusalem community. “The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.” In the end, the folks in Jerusalem can’t come up with any more objections. They praise God for making the gift of repentance and new life available also to Gentiles. This is a major breakthrough in spiritual understanding.

The early community of Jesus saw everything through the lens of what they were used to, what was to them the only way things could possibly be. It is the way of making distinctions—they and us, believers and non-believers, our kind and their kind, the way we do things and the way they do things. It is how religion ends up when it loses touch with its source and becomes focused on itself. We define who is in and who is out, who has the right spiritual credentials or beliefs and who is a heretic, who has the right idea about how to be the church and who is wrong.

God’s spirit breaks down our distinction-making approach to life and faith. God, the creator of the whole universe, of all creatures, of all human beings, erodes those human-made distinctions. God’s love is impartial, where as our love is partial and selective. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, how are you any different from those you think of as godless? The blessings of God’s creation are for everyone because everyone is part of that creation. God’s love makes no distinctions. This is the central message of this story. It is a call for us, Jesus’ community today, to become aware of how we divide up reality, how we subdivide what God has made as one creation.

There is another insight from this story that is related and important. It has to do with the assumptions we make about people. Cornelius was a person who took his spiritual life very seriously. He was part of the hated Roman army, but the kind of person who endeared himself to many Jews. Peter probably hesitated to meet this guy not only because he was Gentile but also because he was a Roman military leader. But Peter was able to listen to God above all else. He swallowed his pride or hate or prejudice and went anyway. This is spiritual courage, to step

beyond the familiar, the safe, the comfortable, and, yes, the self-righteous. “God’s spirit told me to go with them without making a distinction between them and us.”

In order to divide up reality, we make superficial judgments and categorize people—conservatives, liberals, Democrats, Republicans, Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims. Distinctions, boundaries. We assume that we are the only ones with spiritual awareness, who are committed to humane living and humane values. I hope the Christian church is waking up finally to the reality that there are a whole lot of people in this world who are deeply spiritual, moral, and committed to the wellbeing of the human family and the creation itself. For a variety of reasons they choose not to be part of what is called “organized” or “institutional” religion. There are many people of other faith traditions who are as deeply spiritual and moral as we consider ourselves to be, or more so, but who simply have another spiritual practice which they take very seriously. Up to this point in the modern history of the human family, we have chosen to fight over whose religion is right and argue over religious words and ideas. The hope is that maybe we are at the same threshold as the Jerusalem community, about to learn a whole new way of seeing, a new way of being Christian and sharing our faith.

Peter, the Jewish follower of Jesus, was led by God’s spirit to go visit Cornelius, the Gentile Roman soldier. That’s how the spirit of God works, through relationships, expanding our narrow love so that it is more like God’s own love, living toward others and sharing our faith in a way that arises from our deep belief that all people are God’s beloved children, that God’s creation is not divided but one.

Jesus, in John’s gospel, made love the central commandment for his community, for us. “This is my commandment, that you love one another the same way I have loved you. That is how people will know whether or not you are my disciples.” As we are faithful to Jesus Christ by growing into greater understanding of and faithfulness to this commandment to love, we will find ourselves on the same path as did Peter. We will become sensitive to the love of God that flows through and binds together all of creation. We will become aware of our tendencies to make distinctions, to draw the boundary lines, to turn others quickly into “them.” This is the work of our inward journey, working with our own spirits so that we are responsive to God’s ever-widening spirit, so that our love is expanded by God’s inclusive and all-embracing love.

Last Sunday I shared a question around the lunch table. It has to do with a kind of paradox I’ve experienced in my own life. My exclusive commitment to Christian faith, to following Jesus as closely as I can, has led me into dialogue with and learning from persons of other faith traditions and practices. It has also led me again and again to step over the very boundary lines I have drawn that make other people into “them.”

This exclusive Christian commitment has forced me to be aware of the many ways I divide up reality, decide who is right and who is wrong, who is good and who is bad, who is worthy of my love and who is not. In short, my exclusive commitment to following the living Christ has resulted in an ever-opening spirit and a broadening love. It has been a very rewarding journey, but full of challenges to my own spirit.

My question was this: How come people seem to feel welcome and spiritually at home in our community here, people who are at various places in their religious beliefs or spiritual understandings, who may not even be sure what they believe, and yet here we are, a community that works with an exclusive commitment to following Jesus Christ? Well, there is an exclusiveness that shuts people out and there is an exclusiveness that results in an openness of spirit and mind and love. The former is the exclusiveness of making distinctions. The latter is an exclusive commitment to love as Christ loves us. And that kind of exclusive commitment to the life of love results in openness and welcoming, even though we are so aware of how often we fail at it.

Peter learned that following the living Christ means going wherever the spirit of God leads, opening up, not closing in, that God’s spirit and love embrace all of creation. Jesus gives us, his community, one central commandment—Love one another the way I have loved you. That is the way people will know whether or not you are for real, whether you are really my disciples.

So the message to us is to take even more seriously our Christian faith and practice, to commit ourselves more faithfully to the spiritual practices or disciplines that help us with that deep and focused life of following the living Christ. And if we are on that spiritual journey of following Christ above all else, of listening to God above all else, then we need not fear that we will become narrow or bigoted or excluding of people. The spirit of God will always be leading us outward, opening our spirits, and we will be known as true followers of Jesus because we are striving to love all of God’s creatures, beginning with one another.