

The Easter Community Is Accepting

May 9, 2004

John 13:31-35, Acts 11:1-18

“Love one another, as I have loved you”. “Love one another” is hard enough, but “as I have loved you?” Jesus loved us enough to die for us. On this mother’s day we can say that many, maybe most, mothers would die for their children, but that kind of love is, to say the least, unusual. I remember standing in a cathedral, staring at the carvings on an ancient communion table. I was startled to see there the figure of a pelican. Grouped at her feet were three little pelican chicks. Later I heard the story that, if she cannot find fish, the mother pelican stabs her own breast and nourishes her little ones with her blood. What a symbol for the love of Christ! We’re to love one another like that. We have a long way to go.

It was hard enough when Jesus said to that small group of disciples “Love one another,” but at Pentecost the “One anothers” grew to about 3000, and in our text today Peter explains that the “one anothers’ include (who would have thought it?) the Gentiles. So the message is that we are to reach out to strangers and to those who are very different from us. As I said, we have a long way to go.

I’m grateful that the New Testament includes the book of Acts. As the story of the early church, it helps us see how the earliest Christians struggled to be faithful, to fulfill Christ’s command to love. Sometimes you hear people say, “I wish we could get back to the New Testament church, when things were simple and Christians lived in harmony.” This just isn’t so! The early church, too, in its struggle to become a loving community, went through deep conflict, endured severe controversy. How they dealt with it, at least in the scripture we read today, can be a lesson to us--a lesson in acceptance--a lesson in taking our baby steps toward love.

First we need to understand the depth of the controversy. Jews just didn’t eat certain foods. On my first evening in Europe I asked the waiter if they had oysters. He replied, No, but we have some nice eel. I replied, “I’ll have the chicken.” On my last evening in Europe. my friends mother in law announced proudly, “Papa caught an nice eel for our supper.” And so, I ate

eel after all! Peter must have felt about ham and shellfish the way I felt about eel, except that, for him, it was also a moral and religious issue. The prohibition went deeper than any racial prejudice we may have experienced; this taboo was written in the law. From the Jewish perspective, God had decreed that they were to be a holy people, set apart for God. Certain foods were unclean. People who ate them were unclean. To associate with these people, especially to eat with them, was to become unclean. An Peter, their leader Peter, had done a forbidden thing.

And this is where our lesson in acceptance begins.

First, the people criticized Peter. I hope they criticized him directly; it seems that they did. They took him to task for doing something that felt was wrong. Strange as it seems the first step to acceptance is getting the conflict out in the open--not burying it, hoping it will go away. The people were open and honest about their disapproval of Peter's actions.

Second, Peter accepted the people and their criticism. He didn't ignore them. He didn't get huffy and tell them they had no right to criticize him. He didn't put them down, or call them ignorant or backward. He was patient. He knew they needed, they deserved, an explanation. So he explained to them, step by step, how he had come to this new attitude--this new perspective. The writer of Acts has already told the whole story. But Peter's response to the people in Jerusalem is so important that he recounts it all over again: the story of Peter's dream, of the angel coming to Cornelius, of the people at the door when Peter awakens, inviting him to come to Cornelius's house, of Peter's sermon and the spirit descending upon Cornelius's household, of Peter's words, "if they have received the spirit, just as we did, how can we refuse them baptism?"

Third, the people listened. They really listened. How many of you have ever had a disagreement with someone, and while they were speaking, you were only half listening, the other half of your mind being involved with formulating your rebuttal? I do that all the time. I don't believe the apostles were like this. They must have given Peter their whole attention, because when he was finished they didn't say, "But Peter, what about..." or "But Peter have you thought..." No, when Peter was finished, they were silent, just silent, taking it all in.

Finally, there wasn't just agreement. They didn't shrug their

shoulders and say, “There goes the neighborhood.” They didn’t say reluctantly, “Well, if you say so, Peter.” No, they began praising God! They begin saying, “God’s message it for the Gentiles, too. Isn’t that wonderful?” They were excited about the circle being drawn wider--they accepted, not just Peter’s explanation, they also accepted their new brothers and sisters in Christ.

Something had to happen to make all of this possible. This was the work of the Holy Spirit. You see that all through the story, don’t you? The Holy Spirit was at work in Peter’s dream and his acceptance of it. The Holy Spirit came to Cornelius and his family. Peter was empowered to recognize the Spirit’s work. And the Holy Spirit was at work in the hearts of the apostles, so they were able to accept Peter’s story and praise God for their new brothers and sisters.

But what about the times when we find ourselves among the excluded or the lonely? Does knowing how this feels help us to be accepting? Our own Don Shockley has written about one such time in his book Private Prayers in Public Places.

His experience sheds light on the issue at hand:

Tonight I am learning a new, deep lesson on the importance of relationships with other people. I have lived alone in a new place for only about eight days. But my wife of twenty-one years is on the opposite side of this continent in California, waiting until the house sells before she can join me here in Georgia. We do not know when that will be. Tonight I thought a better than average dinner might cheer me up, but as I sit and wait for sautéed shrimp I have already begun to pour my feelings out, writing all over a paper place mat.

You have to have family and friends if you are to keep your soul intact in this world. It doesn’t have to be a traditional family, just a circle of folks who care deeply about us, and we about them. So, dear God, hear me. If ever I have inwardly complained about the burdens of parenthood: if I have entertained a false and foolish fantasy about the carefree life of single persons; if I have regretted the necessity of daily toil that others in addition to myself may eat and be clothed, dear Lord, forgive me! I know, *how* I know in this moment, that I cannot be myself by myself. I know You have made me, and each one of us, for others, for life in relationships. And I have those relationships in great abundance, beautiful, holy, loving relationships:

wife, sons, daughter,
sister, mother, fathers, friends tried and true. And, although I may feel a bit isolated right now, I am profoundly aware of all these ties to others and I am grateful indeed.

So now comes the further thought: let me be for all these dear ones what they are for me. Open me still further to their needs for support and affirmation. And beyond the circles of intimacy that are especially important to me, open me more and more to those dear strangers who, no less than myself, stand in need of love and care. In this new city and new job, lead me to those persons I am best prepared to help. And, above all, grant me this further wish: that in finding myself in and for others I may be found again by You.

I managed to stop writing long enough to finish my meal and it was quite special, even if unshared. Then this happened: I asked the waitress where I might find a certain store and she quickly told me how to get there. As she turned to leave, she gently placed her hand on my shoulder; not just a touch but a gentle grasp that seemed to say, "I'm lonely too, sometimes." I almost thanked her for reaching out to me that way, but the verbal acknowledgment would have robbed the gesture of its power. She must know I got the message. I hope she knows how gratefully I received it. (Don Shockley, Private Prayers in Public Places, p. 42

Where do we find ourselves in this morning's text? Are we the lonely, excluded ones. Are there people who criticize us that we need to be patient with? Who do we disagree with that we have trouble listening to--a family member? a church member? a pesky neighbor? What is it, who is it that we have trouble accepting? the homeless? gang member? homosexuals? Moslems? Jews? Catholics? Pentecostals? Liberals? Conservatives? Can we, dare we, open our eyes and our hearts to the possibility that the Holy Spirit is at work among those we despise. those we don't agree with? that the Holy Spirit may even be at work in our hearts opening them to wider possibilities, newer and wider love? Can we accept that the circle has widened? May God make it so.