

May 1, 2010 – 5th Sunday in Easter

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Texts: Acts 11, John 13

First Lutheran Church, Waterbury, CT

Love Without Distinction? Who Could Do *That*?

So when Peter went up to Jerusalem,
the circumcised believers criticized him, saying,
‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’

Every now and then, the word of God calls preachers to broach subjects they’d rather just let alone. But, preaching is not about the preacher, so, let’s talk circumcision.

(Don’t worry, it’s not even slightly racy).

But let me ask you, who are the ‘circumcised believers’? What group of people? *The Jews*. Jews who’d found the way of Christ, and were following it. They believed Jesus was the Messiah, risen from the dead. And they were forming a great community of fellow-believers. (Fellow *Jewish* believers). Who kept Jewish customs, and rituals and laws. And they lived in harmony, celebrating Christ’s victory and growing the Church in Jerusalem. Problem is, news like resurrection travels fast. Especially with good evangelists like Peter and Paul out in the world. More and more folks heard the good news, and more and more believed. But they weren’t all Jews. Many were gentiles, ‘uncircumcised believers.’ So what’s the big deal? The more the merrier, we want the church to grow, right? Well, the Jews had purity laws. Ways of keeping themselves holy. Rules for keeping their identity as God’s chosen people. They had rituals for being in right, fit, acceptable —kosher—relationship with God. (Lots of rules and rituals). They only ate certain foods. They only wore certain fabrics. Only grew certain plants. They had purity codes for every single part of their lives—birth, death, health, gender, marriage, sex, behavior, hygiene, business and... *ethnicity*. You don’t hang out with Gentiles. No non-Jews. You don’t eat with them, you don’t speak to them.

Now, if you absolutely *have* to talk to one... Like if a big scary Roman soldier comes up and asks you a direction question... It’s okay. It’s not a sin to answer. You just become ritually unclean. And then you do some ritual to become clean again. No sin there. There’s only *sin* if you *intentionally* break the rules; if you don’t try to avoid breaking them.

When Peter went up to Jerusalem,
the circumcised believers criticized him, saying,
‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’

Peter didn’t avoid Gentiles when spreading the Gospel. And they want to know why.

So Peter answers....

Well, guys, you see, I had this crazy vision... I was hungry, and suddenly all kinds of animals came down from the sky... And they were all unclean, un-kosher animals... But a voice said, get up, kill and eat. And I knew it was God, so I said no way! I'm a good Jew. I can't do that....

It's against everything I know... Contrary to everything I am.

Lord, that's contrary to your own law!

Yeah, that's the problem with God's law. It was given to humans. And we have a way of corrupting the gifts God gives us. A way of twisting their essential truth. And tarnishing their beauty with our sin. All those instructions God gave the Jews to set them apart—to consecrate them as the first holy and *chosen* people of God—Well they got twisted. They were used to isolate others, used to spread mistrust, and exclusion. They got tarnished by arrogance and self-righteousness. And often became the seeds of intolerance and hatred. In the name of *religion*.

Within a community of faith.

Ah, but that was then, this is now.

We never take God's word and twist it to say what we think it should. Christians don't isolate others, right? And churches don't exclude. All are welcome here at First Lutheran, right?

We treat every single person the same, right?

Maybe. Maybe that's right.

But if it is, then we are *one extraordinary* church.

It's so easy to fall into the trap of intolerance. Even in a church.

Let's ask ourselves... Who do we feel superior to... Morally? Who do we look down on, socially? Who do we shy from, racially? Who do we shun for their lifestyle? Who don't we want sitting next to us in church? Or across from us at the dinner table?

Look around... who isn't here, because they wouldn't feel very welcome?

So when Peter went up to Jerusalem,

the circumcised believers criticized him, saying,

'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?'

Peter didn't avoid the Gentiles when spreading the Gospel...

And they want to know why.

Well, guys I had this crazy vision... Get up, Peter, and eat...

What God has made clean, you must not call profane.

It was God's way of saying, *don't discriminate*. There's no such thing as clean or unclean people. We all need God, and God wants us all...

But it is so deeply human to exclude. So ingrained in our nature so shun what's different.
It's a habit so hard to break. Just look what it took to convince Christ's followers back then.
You all heard the first reading... It took a trance, a vision, an angel visitation, and the whirlwind
of Holy Spirit showing up and blowing their minds clear.

The Holy Spirit fell upon them,
just as it had upon us at the beginning...
If God gave them the same gift of the Spirit that he gave us when
we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?

This Gentile Pentecost. Well, that cinched it. That proved once and for all, God shows no
partiality (Even us gentiles are welcome). The good news of salvation in Jesus Christ is for
everybody, each believer... even the people we'd rather not sit with in church.

If God gave them the same gift of the Spirit... who am I to hinder God?

All are welcome. All are loved. That's what it means to be a godly, a Christian, community.
That's what it means to follow Christ.

I give you a new commandment, Jesus said.
I give you a new commandment,
that you love one another, just as I have loved you.

God has loved us, without distinction, without partiality, without limit. And wants us to do the
same. That's not just a new idea to humans... it's mind boggling, really.

Who could do that? Love on command? Love because we're supposed to? Love when we don't
feel loving, or even loveable? Who could do that? Love someone we're angry with?

Love someone who's hurt us? Love without expecting something back? Who could do that?

Love an enemy? Love someone who doesn't even like me? Love someone with hopelessly
wrong ideas? Who could do that? Love someone we don't trust? Love a stranger? Love someone
we don't know? Love some *so different* from us? Who could do that?

Well, no one. . . . No one who has confused the deep, compassionate, self-giving love of Christ
with easy sentimentality. I'm afraid we've cheapened the word 'love' over the years, even when
we're talking about Christ. *Jesus loves me*... It's taken on that warm, fuzzy, feel-good,
Hallmark-card kinda sense. And that is just not enough to carry the weight of Christian love.
Love without prejudice. Love that gives more than gets. Love that puts others before us. And doesn't
choose *which others*. Love without distinction *is* mind-boggling, if we think it has anything to do
with how we *feel*. Yes, love can feel warm, enfolding, sheltering. Yes, love can feel good. But it
can be powerful and difficult too. And it can change our lives. So it can feel pretty scary too...

Uncertain. Risky. Confusing. Real love can be tough to live into. Tough to live out, out there in the world. And even in here, in the church. It seems so hard to do. But make no mistake, Christ has called us to do 'love' no matter how it feels. To welcome and care and serve everyone. Even those people who totally freak us out.

So, how do we do it? Where do we even start?

The Holy Spirit fell upon them
just as it had upon us at the beginning.

At the beginning of each of our lives of faith, the Holy Spirit fell on us.

At our baptisms, the Holy Spirit fell on us, and filled us with the love and the power of Christ. Each one of us has that love, has that power in us. Each of us has that voice in us. Calling us, urging us, and strengthening us to love. To do just what God has commanded. No matter how risky or scary or awkward it might feel. That is Christ's own voice in us. And we can let the power of it fill us, and move us to action.

That's where we start. By trusting that voice. By obeying it one tiny, uncomfortable step at time.

One outstretched hand... One choice of a different seat at coffee hour... One chat with a stranger... One re-thinking of our prejudices... One step at a time.

Yeah, it's a life-long work, trusting the voice of Christ inside us.

But we need to start now. And we can. *We can* trust it.

We can trust Christ's spirit, Christ's love, in us. It *will not* betray us.

It's the love that gave its life for us, so that we might live. So that we might live...and love.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.