

Bible Tuesday for the 5th Sunday of Easter

Acts 11:1-18

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "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. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times; then everything was pulled up into heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. 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. 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; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remember 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 hinder God?" 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."

In all four gospels, Jesus does ministry among Israelites first and then moves into Gentile territory for a while. Nevertheless, in the book of Acts and in Paul's epistles, the disciples stayed in their home territory and ministered to Jews first. Part of Jewish law is that Jews were to stay ritually clean in order to be able to go to Temple and synagogue to worship God. Jews believed that eating with Gentiles, as well as some associating with Gentiles, made them ritually unclean, so they avoided it. Despite Jesus' clear example of associating with both Jews and Gentiles, the disciples struggled to overcome their adherence to Jewish Law where Jesus defied it.

The first disciple to break from Jewish Law and evangelize to Gentiles was Phillip, when he ministered to and baptized the Ethiopian eunuch. Next is the above story. The Gentile household to which Peter and his companions is called is the house of Cornelius, the centurion. Despite being a Roman, Cornelius is also a worshiper of God, and aided in the building of the local synagogue. Peter was fearful to go to his house for several reasons. 1) It is against Jewish law to enter a Gentile house. 2) It is against Jewish law to eat with Gentiles, which will no doubt happen if Peter enters the house, as that is proper hospitality. 3) May the Centurion isn't interested in proper hospitality but rather wants to capture Peter and his companions as followers of the treasonous Jesus of Nazareth. 4) What will the other apostles and disciples think of Peter and/or do to him if news of the Gentile visit spreads? 5) Does God

really want us to evangelize to the Gentiles? Isn't this salvation just for Jews? Even if it is for Gentiles, they have to become Jews first, right? Jesus, the Christ, is the fulfillment of the Covenant God made with the Jews so anyone who is saved by Jesus must be a Jew first, right?

Yet, Peter and his companions get to Cornelius' house and witness the indwelling of the Holy Spirit on all members of this Roman house! Peter even asks, "Is there any reason these people should not be baptized?!" Peter absolutely did not see them as candidates for baptism, but God did.

Rumor spread in Jerusalem about Peter not only going to a Gentile house, not only eating with Gentiles, but actually staying overnight in that house for a couple nights! The elders in Jerusalem called him to appear before them. Who are these elders? Peter appears to be the chief apostle in the gospels so, if there is a group of Jesus followers who are elders, wouldn't Peter number among them? There is biblical evidence of these elders but none of how they were chosen. James, Jesus' brother, appears to be the head of these elders but no others are named. Earlier chapters of the book of Acts relate stories where Peter does appear to be the head apostle but by the time of this story, he clearly is not.

What surprises me most about this story is the last line: "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life." I would expect to read, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the gift of eternal life," but Luke writes, "the repentance that leads to life." We think of repentance as a sorrowful task of recounting our sins, fessing up. But that is very different from the way these elders are thinking. Why? Why have we lost or misunderstood or misinterpreted?

Psalm 148

Hallelujah!

Praise the Lord from the Heavens; praise Him on high.

Praise Him, all His angels, praise Him, all His hosts.

Praise Him, sun and moon, praise Him, all bright stars.

Praise Him, highest heavens, and you waters that are above the heavens.

Let them praise the name of the Lord, for it was He who commanded that they be created.

He made them endure forever, establishing an order that shall never change.

Praise the Lord, O you who are on earth, all sea monsters and ocean depths, fire and hail, snow and smoke, storm wind that executes His command, all mountains and hills, all fruit trees and cedars, all wild and tamed beasts, creeping things and winged birds, all kings and peoples of the earth, all princes of the earth and its judges, youths and maidens alike, old and young together.

Let them praise the name of the Lord for His name, His alone, is sublime; His splendor covers heaven and earth.

He has exalted the horn of His people for the glory of all His faithful ones, Israel, the people close to Him.

Hallelujah.

These last psalms of the psalter were written as pure praise of God. Scholars suspect that some were written for their final place in the psalter, while others were praise psalms that were saved for the end of the book. This particular psalm calls on all creation to praise God.

The psalmist begins admonishing the heavenly court to praise God, and then moves on to the agents of God, those works of creation which convey God's power, majesty, and might: sun, moon, stars, weather, then earthly creations of mountains, trees, animals, and finally humans.

"Exalted the horn of His people" – if one thinks about a horned animal, this phrase means that God has lifted the heads of his people, in other words, God has raised them up from a posture of shame to a posture of pride to be admired.

Revelation 21:1-6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth have passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals, He will dwell with them as their God; and they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also, He said, "Write this for these words are trustworthy and true." Then He said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life."

This is the first verse of the final chapters of the book of Revelation. In the vision of John of Patmos, the final battle between God and evil has taken place and God has won. Evil is no more, swallowed up in the disintegrating old earth. The vision then turns to what has been promised throughout the book, a permanent place of safety and shalom for creation and all the faithful in which they will dwell with God. No longer will God be removed in heaven and humans on earth, a rift between them caused by sin, but rather God and humans will dwell together in creation.

What God/Jesus started by creating all that is out of nothing, Jesus/God has now fulfilled by being God and yet dying and then rising from death. Jesus is the beginning and the ending of all that is, the alpha and omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet.

John 13:31-35

When Judas had gone out to betray Jesus, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. 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.' 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.”

The gospel of John has as a main theme that God is revealed in His opposite. This is an excellent example of that theme. Judas has just left the last meal that the disciples and the twelve will have with Jesus. Judas was sitting at dinner with Jesus and everyone else when Jesus declared with anger and vexation that, “One of you will betray me.” The disciples anxiously ask, “Who? Is it I?” Jesus replies, “The one to whom I give this piece of bread.” Then Jesus takes a bit of bread and hands it to Judas Iscariot. Jesus then says to Judas, “Go now and do what you must quickly.” Judas then runs into the night, to turn up later with soldiers and servants of the High Priest to arrest Jesus.

Immediately after Judas runs out into the night, Jesus turns to the remaining disciples and the eleven and says, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified.” How does Judas running out to betray Jesus glorify Jesus? Judas betraying Jesus sets the wheels in motion which will bring about Jesus’ execution and resurrection. This is God’s glory, not the Palm Sunday political rally/parade, but the agonizing death of the only righteous one, Jesus/God.

“Glory” can be understood to be “the definition” or “the defining moment”. In the above passage, Jesus is declaring that what defines him as God incarnate, the God Man, is that he will be betrayed and crucified over trumped up charges in order to be the ultimate and final sacrificial lamb for the sins of the world. In this horrible, humiliating act, we see who Jesus really is and what God really is. Therefore, it is glorious.

However, Jesus’ death also means separation from the disciples. When Jesus “descended to the dead”, truly the disciples could not come with him. And by redeeming the nothingness of death and making it the somethingness of eternal life with God, the disciples never will go to where Jesus goes, so Jesus speaks prophetically when he says, “Where I am going you cannot come.”

So while Jesus is absent, what are his disciples and the eleven to do? “Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you must also love one another.” What does Jesus mean by “love” and just who does he mean by “one another?” “Love” is the English translation of the Greek “agape” which does not mean “warm snuggly feelings about someone or something,” but rather “the faithful, forgiving way God relates to humans” Jesus commands us to love everyone else on the planet in the same way that God loves us.

It is the giving of this remarkable and impossible command on the Thursday before Easter that gives us the name Maundy Thursday. “Maundy” means “commandment”. Jesus gives us a new commandment, to love one another as God loves us. WOW!