

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

May 17, 2009

Easter 6B 2009

In the Name of our one living, ever creating, ever redeeming, ever sustaining God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Here at the tail end of the 50 days of Easter, we read each year from the Gospel of John. Is today's Gospel lesson familiar? Do you remember hearing some snippets from it recently? Well, today's lesson is from the last great teaching discourse in the Gospel of John. It occurs during the Last Supper as Jesus prepares his disciples for the events that will unfold starting that very evening. He is preparing them for his death on the cross and seeks to explain the meaning of these events. John's account is probably more lyrical and theological than historical. His community in the early Second Century had experienced many great changes and dislocations. To many, it must have seemed that the world had been turned upside down. John's community also had several generations of living as a Christian community in this turbulent world. Here he is expressing the importance of finding and living out the love of God in community even as that community was itself changing along with the rest of the world. John is talking about how to live faithfully in community in uncertain times, and, boy, doesn't that sound like the church today.

"Love one another as I have loved you" is repeated several times in John's Gospel. We use these words each Maundy Thursday evening as we wash one another's feet – an act of such humility and servanthood that only a foreign slave could be compelled to do it in the culture of the day. The love spoken of is not words but actions. It is not about individual emotion but faithful attachment to another and to the community. Such love is tied to

faithfulness – “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept the Father’s commandments and abide in his love.” It is also relational. By joining our will to the will of the other we abide together. This involves a conscious decision – a decision to move outside of our own selves and self-interest and towards the other. There is a cost to this but there is also a reward. The relationship changes; it becomes one of intimacy, one of mutual understanding. Jesus says he has disclosed all and now can call his disciples “friends” rather than servants since they now know him. Everyone who is married or has had a close loving friendship can understand what Jesus is talking about here. It is about being church at its best. We don’t have to be of one mind or agree on most things but we do have to be open to the one another and to see the Christ in each other.

“I call you friends.” God is changing the way God relates to humanity. God is leaving the temple; God is preparing to leave the boundaries of the cult and move out into the world. This is not our doing. We did nothing to deserve or promote this. “You did not choose me but I chose you.” That’s the wonder of it all.

Annie Lamott in one of her books talks about teaching this lesson to her Sunday school class at Marin Presbyterian Church. She would play the character of Jesus and say something like, “I choose the boy wearing an orange shirt with a Pac man on it” or “I choose the girl in the yellow jumper with the purple socks on.” Then she’d wait until some kid beams with self-recognition and runs up to her. She’s repeat the process until the whole class was up there in her lap or on the sofa with her. The little kids learned some big lessons: 1. How to listen and recognize when God calls us; 2. It only works if we respond and 3 What matter is being chosen and not who else Jesus might choose.

Our first lesson from the book of Acts is also important to this truth that it is God who does the choosing. Unfortunately, the lectionary only gives us a tiny bit of the story so I'd like to fill it in because I think Chapter 10 is perhaps the most important story in the Book of Acts about what God was doing in the early Christian communities.

In Caesarea, the Roman port City that was the seat of the Roman Governor, a Roman centurion named Cornelius, who was a God fearing man who gave alms and prayed constantly to God, had a vision. An angel appeared and called him by name – that's bible talk for a prophetic vision is about to happen. The angel told him his prayers and good deeds had found favor with God and the angel directed him to send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who was called Peter. So Simon dispatched some of his men to find this Simon called Peter.

Now Peter the next day was hungry and was sitting on his roof when he fell into a trance. He, too, had a vision. The heavens opened and a sheet came down filled with all kinds of four footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. "Get up, Peter, and kill and eat!" a voice said. Peter refused. It was all animals forbidden by the dietary laws and purity code of Leviticus and Peter kept strictly kosher all his life and all this stuff was traife! The voice called a second time telling Peter that he should never call profane whatever God has made clean. This happened three times and suddenly, the sheet and everything was taken back up to heaven.

While Peter was pondering all this, the men sent by Cornelius arrive and the Spirit tells Peter to "go with them without hesitation because I have sent them to you." Peter invited them in and gave them lodging. The next morning Peter and some of the other believers went with them to Cornelius' house in Caesarea. He went in and found that Cornelius' household and many others had been assembled to hear Peter. Peter was real

up front with them. He said that they knew full well that it was unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile, but that God had just shown him that “he should never call anyone profane or unclean.” Peter asked why he had been sent for and Cornelius spoke of his vision and the command he got to send for Peter. Cornelius said that they were ready to hear from Peter all that the Lord has commanded Peter to say. Peter then gave his standard stump sermon about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ who is Lord of all and that all who believe in him receive forgiveness of sins through his name.

We now come to today’s reading where God’s outpouring of the Spirit upon the gentiles both astounded the Jewish believers who had come with Peter and convinced Peter that he could not withhold the water of baptism from those who had received the same outpouring of the Spirit that they had received.

Most of the time, I think this lesson is preached along the lines that God loves and accepts us if we are card carrying Christians of some sort or another; that us Christians now live under the biblical tent with God’s blessing. But in these times filled with mistrust, anger and name calling, I think we all need to see clearly the point of this story of Chapter 10 of Acts. We need to hear the words of Acts 10:31-34 – “Then Peter said to them, ‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but that in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.’” God just might be pitching a far bigger tent than many – including many Christians - can imagine.

The story continues into the first half of Chapter 11 or the Book of Acts. This, too, gets left out of the lectionary. It seems Peter was called on the carpet for baptizing Cornelius and his household. Peter was criticized by the circumcised believers for having gone to visit the uncircumcised men and to have eaten with them. Peter explained the whole story and concluded by saying, “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?" That silenced his critics. Given what is going on in Anglican circles we should remember those words of Peter.

There are a lot of people both in the church and in the larger society who believe that they get to do the choosing rather than God. Our readings today show that this has always been the case. Lately, the level of animus has reached intolerable levels. Perhaps it is time to remind them that the Church doesn't belong to any of us and that it is God who still gets to do the choosing even if it upsets some of us. Some may wish to go with certainty their own way and adopt the English Prayer Book of 1666 as their statement of faith, but that is not my idea of faithfulness to a living God. Living also means becoming and God calls us into the future. Together, being open and available to one another, we jointly seek to discern what God is calling us into.

AMEN.