

LOVE'S LEADING EDGE

Easter 5 – Cycle C: Acts 11:1-18; John 13:31-35

Next Sunday, I will give thanks for the 19 years I've spent here at Christ Church as your pastor. Although there have been sad and challenging times, there have been many more wonderful and happy times. I have been truly blessed in this call, and I have fond memories of all 19 years. Anyway, it was about Year 11, I believe, on a Sunday when I had preached what I thought was a real barn-burner on the radical welcome of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that one of the worshippers said unapologetically as she was leaving the sanctuary at the end of worship that she had always preferred exclusivity over inclusivity. At first I thought she might be pulling my leg – and perhaps she was – but she didn't crack a smile after her statement, and made no further comment when all I could offer her was silence and a shocked expression on my face.

I have never forgotten that moment, because I expect that she wasn't joking; that there's a messiness to welcoming everybody that didn't appeal to her. And I expect that there were others present that morning who would have agreed with her, but opted not to challenge me.

Anyway, when I was studying this morning's First Reading earlier in the week, I thought of that conversation and a lot of other unwelcoming comments I have heard from people during my lifetime in the church. What I realized was that the notion of exclusivity is not new to the Christian community: it's at least 2,000 years old according to this morning's passage from Luke-Acts, and may be more accurately a mark of human nature than it is a characteristic of the church.

We do a lot of sorting in our short lives – people we like, and people we don't like; people with whom we share a lot in common, and people with whom we don't have much in common. People at our age and stage, and people who aren't. People from home, and people from away. There are countless distinctions, really. The genius of computer dating, the ultimate sorting exercise, is that couples don't need to spend a lot of time doing a triage of another's personality and interests. We can cut to the chase, although I expect the chase is over if you've found a good match on-line. How post-modern of us to have applied computer technology to courtship! How do I love thee? Let me check your e-Harmony profile so that I can be precise.

Anyway, Peter returns to Jerusalem from Caesarea where he has just baptized the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household. And the Jewish disciples in the Jerusalem church are less than impressed. To be accurate, Luke doesn't have them objecting to the baptisms Peter has conducted; they may not know about them! On the other hand, they may know and have decided it's easier to challenge Peter on breaking the Jewish dietary laws by eating with Gentiles and eating non-kosher food.

In any event, Peter spills the whole story – about his trance, and in the vision he had protesting not only a variety of four-footed animals (undoubtedly including pigs), but also beasts of prey (also not on approved list). Three times in the dream Peter protests that he could not even consider eating from the selection of food presented on the sheet lowered from heaven. And three times a voice – which he deduces is the voice of God – three times the voice says to him, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat." Finally on the third time, the voice says to Peter, "What God has made clean, *you* must not call profane."

I expect Peter was under a fair bit of pressure in Joppa. At the end of last Sunday's First Reading, Luke says that after the raising of Tabitha, Peter went to stay at the home of Simon the tanner. He may not have had many options for hospitality: I can well imagine that anyone who knew that he had raised Tabitha might have wanted to keep him at a distance; he was just a little bit dangerous. We know that Simon, because he was a tanner, was ritually unclean. He was probably a Gentile, and accepting Simon's hospitality, however welcome, may have made Peter anxious. And all the animal skins in the house may well have prompted his dream about all kinds of four-footed animals, beasts of prey, and reptiles.

When he returns to Jerusalem from Joppa and Caesarea, Peter's story to the Jewish disciples in Jerusalem about his trance and vision modulates seamlessly into a story about his bringing Cornelius and his whole household into the church. So much for exclusivity! Peter, with a little divine nudging and the grace of the Holy Spirit, made an executive decision and became the agent for changing the church of

UFO's – us fellas only – to something that more closely resembled the Jewish-Gentile mix that was already everywhere. You can tell from Luke's comment that the disapproving Jerusalem disciples were silenced when Peter finished his monologue that not only had they been won over, but they also needed a moment to take in what Peter had just said. It was what we used to call an Aha! moment when they realized that their God was too small. Luke writes, "...they praised God saying, 'Then God has given *even to the Gentiles* the repentance that leads to life.'"

For readers of the New Testament, this event, as important as it was for the early church's self-understanding and identity, is not earth-shattering. Many times in the Gospels, we see Jesus reaching beyond the Jewish community to people from whom the pious community had traditionally kept its distance: Jairus was a Roman whose daughter Jesus healed; the despised Samaritans figure in Jesus' ministry; tax collectors, lepers, the mysterious Syro-Phoenecian woman. In Matthew's version of Jesus' birth narrative, Gentile astrologers have an epiphany and come to Bethlehem to pay homage to one they recognize as the king of kings. Jesus' story is not a story of exclusivity; but it is a story of love! A love that calls us to places we might not otherwise go; a love that calls us into friendship with people we might otherwise avoid; a love that calls us to serve one another, forgive one another, and give those who have disappointed us a second chance; a love that calls us to rescue and support and accompany people who are in need; a love that calls us to use our gifts for the sake of another's wellbeing.

We often sing that old hymn, O Love That Will Not Let Me Go, a hymn that names the quality of love we encounter and receive through God's grace to us in Jesus. But it is also the Love that takes us where we don't want to go, where tradition and cultural conditioning scream caution, where, by breaking rank, we risk entering into conflict with people we like or even love.

Here's an example from church life of the Love that takes us where we don't want to go. During the past three weeks I have been at several meetings with church leaders from across Canada who are struggling with the issue of an open table, by which I mean an open invitation to all present at worship to share the bread and cup of Holy Communion. There is this phenomenon in church circles known as the accidental reception of the Eucharist. It occurs when someone who has not been baptized is communed. Many church leaders and theologians argue against the conditions that provide for such an accident. As a pastor, I have no trouble understanding the objections raised, but gospel love, the love Jesus lived, calls us to this kind of messiness in church life. Truthfully, ambiguity and paradox are no strangers to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and by walking love's talk we have no option but to enter into the paradox that even though we know better, we eat with Gentiles and cleanse lepers and sojourn with Samaritans.

All of this is a bit precious, however, when we consider the real issues in our world. Truthfully, we have taken sorting to a new level. We're accustomed to poverty, not only within our borders, but internationally. Christians often take Jesus' quip, "The poor will always be with you" out of its context in order to justify doing nothing to establish a just society. The women's movement notwithstanding, women are still not being paid equal pay for equal work across the board. Women are kept out of positions of power in big business; and when the barriers do come down, their environment is typically hostile. We have a troubled relationship with the First Nations peoples in Canada, and need to spend time and effort working through the difficult and complex issues that are easier to avoid. And much of society is content with interpretations of conflict as "us" and "them" situations: we sort people by giving them labels and moving on. I take it as a good sign that we are asking ourselves questions about the tragedy in Dhaka, Bangladesh this week. People who buy inexpensive clothing made in the so-called Developing World are not directly responsible for the owner of the garment factory's negligence in the collapse of his building; but compassion for the families affected by the deaths of the 350-some workers has taken us closer to their world. We are inclined to see them as sisters and brothers, rather than sweat-shop labourers; and we begin to care not only about the loss of life, but also their low wages of \$39 a month.

And so, what we see in today's First Reading and what we hear in Jesus' commandment in today's Gospel is a prescription for costly discipleship. Love leads us into relationships and debates and decisions from which our human nature and culture typically call us away. Love leads us into messiness and blessing, all at once; both at the same time. Such is the way of Jesus' call to love one another. In the same move, we lose ourselves and we find ourselves; we initiate change and are changed; we are

wounded, but we become God's health for our broken world. Because of Jesus and his love, we have been given a cutting edge. Like Peter, we can be dangerous!