

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Year C
RCL

- Acts 11:1-18
- Psalm 148
- Revelation 21:1-6



The Collect

Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life: Grant us so perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow his steps in the way that leads to eternal life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

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 again to 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 remembered 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.”

Psalm 148

Laudate Dominum

1 Hallelujah!

Praise the LORD from the heavens; *
praise him in the heights.

2 Praise him, all you angels of his; *
praise him, all his host.

3 Praise him, sun and moon; *
praise him, all you shining stars.

4 Praise him, heaven of heavens, *
and you waters above the heavens.

5 Let them praise the Name of the LORD; *
for he commanded, and they were created.

6 He made them stand fast for ever and ever; *
he gave them a law which shall not pass away.

7 Praise the LORD from the earth, *
you sea-monsters and all deeps;

8 Fire and hail, snow and fog, *
tempestuous wind, doing his will;

9 Mountains and all hills, *
fruit trees and all cedars;

10 Wild beasts and all cattle, *
creeping things and winged birds;

11 Kings of the earth and all peoples, *
princes and all rulers of the world;

12 Young men and maidens, *
old and young together.

13 Let them praise the Name of the LORD, *
for his Name only is exalted,
his splendor is over earth and heaven.

14 He has raised up strength for his people
and praise for all his loyal servants, *
the children of Israel, a people who are near him.
Hallelujah!

The Epistle

Revelation 21:1-6

I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had 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;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe 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.”

SERMON

OMG! OMG! That's what I hear from the younger generation when they text me or write on Facebook.

Can you believe that she wore that to SCHOOL?
OMG!

Of course, for those of you who don't spend all day on Facebook like I do, OMG is shorthand for “Oh My God” and is an expression of astonishment or sarcasm. Oh My God! So and so did something so unbelievable that I must call out for support from God to sustain me through the shock of it all.

If OMG really was an appeal for strength from God to survive something in life, it would be a prayer, but it is not. It is just something some people say – a tribal motto, like putting “In God We Trust” on our money. Nothing could be further from a true prayer than saying OMG over something someone said yesterday. In prayer, we address God as “my God” to acknowledge God's ownership of us. OMG turns that prayer on its head and “my God” becomes the God I own, the textbook definition of what it means to take the name of God in vain.

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?”

Here's the problem in a nutshell. Believing that God belongs to them, the people criticizing Peter and the other apostles are trying to limit the scope of God's action in the world to just them. Claiming ownership of God on any level is a thorough-going sin and at some level we all know that, but we, poor sinners, often overlook it because granting lip service to God is so much easier than actually following God's requirements of us.

This fallacy, which, I confess, we all share, was illuminated marvelously well in the paper this week when one of the City fathers offered to pay for decals proclaiming “In

God we Trust” on Ashland’s first responder vehicles. When this offer was questioned, he replied,

“I told Chief Ratliff there is an option and I would provide them if they wanted them,” adding the decision was not based on religion, but rather an act of patriotism — a similar statement to what Greenup County Sheriff Keith Cooper said when he decided to add the motto to sheriff’s department vehicles more than a year ago, according to WSAZ-TV.

“I know a lot of people are looking at it as a religious symbol and that's not necessarily what it's about. It's a U.S. motto and I told them if they wanted to put that on there, I would pay.”

“In God we Trust” isn't a religious symbol, but a patriotic one? The city father making the offer is a friend of mine and a good man, but I have to disagree. If “In God We Trust” doesn't mean that we trust in God, then it's meaningless. Saying otherwise is just trying to have your cake and eat it, too.

We are tremendously adept at this sort of fancy footwork. In the early 20th Century Ashland understood itself to be a place which does no business on Sunday and most particularly no entertainment business, which might distract from attendance at church. We saw ourselves as the guys who “Remember the Sabbath and keep it Holy”. To formalize this flattering assessment, Ashland passed a law forbidding, among other things, the operation of a movie theater on Sunday.

That presented a problem for my grandfather Stewart, because he ran the Capital Theater and estimated, correctly as it turned out, that there were a lot of people who would enjoy seeing what John Wayne was up to, even on a Sunday. Ashland's flattering law pulled him one way, his desire to provide for his family and the demand of his customers the other. What to do? What to do?

What he did was to take my mother with him to run the concession counter while he sold tickets. Soon, the police would arrive and arrest Granddad. Mom would then take his place at the ticket counter while the police ran Granddad over to the county judge's

house. He would be fined \$25, the police would return him to the theater, Mom would return to the concession counter, and John Wayne would do whatever John Wayne was doing that week. We are VERY good at this sort of fancy footwork!

Those challenging Peter were saying, “We're the good guys who follow all the rules in kashrut. We don't eat unclean things. We don't associate with non-Jews. We are God's special people, and He is our God.” Peter is about to show them that being God's people means submitting yourself to God's will, rather than claiming ownership of God.

John of Patmos, many years after the time we read of in Acts, wrote a letter which we know as the Book of Revelation. He spoke of God's scope of action in this way:

I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had 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 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.”

God is doing a new thing, bringing water from the spring of the water of life to all who thirst. Those criticizing Peter are saying, “No new things!” They have confused OMG, which should be a prayer, with a claim of ownership of God. True worship is submission to the will of God. We would much rather compromise on that, offering lip service rather than a contrite and submissive heart. It won't do, church. It just won't do. The county judge might get away with cutting granddad Stewart a break. God forgives, but does not compromise. You are called as a Christian to put your life, your liberty and your sacred honor at the service of God the creator.

How did we get into such a muddle? The answer won't please you. I'm warning you beforehand. We got into this muddle by first convincing ourselves that we own God, as

we have seen, and then by murdering Him. Told you you wouldn't like it!

Now, before you get out the pitchforks and torches, let me clarify that a bit. I saw a church sign this week which said, "God is dead', Nietzsche." On the second line, it read, "'Nietzsche is dead', God". Friedrich Nietzsche commanded a lot of my attention when I was a young man so the sign caught my eye. "God is dead" is probably the best known thing that Friedrich Nietzsche ever said. It has infuriated Christians since 1882. Whatever did he mean?

We can operate a motor vehicle at mind-bending speed and do it while drunk. We can fly ourselves through the air carrying death and destruction for those on the ground. We can split the atom. We can detonate a tiny sun on the surface of our planet and kill untold thousands in an instant. We have not only learned how to do these things, we can construct credible reasons to do them without considering the morality of doing so! We live in a time of relative morality. The phrase "God is dead" conveyed Nietzsche's view that humans are no longer able to believe in any cosmic order since they themselves no longer recognize it. The death of God will lead, Nietzsche says, not only to the rejection of a belief of cosmic or physical order but also to a rejection of absolute values themselves — to the rejection of belief in an objective and universal moral law, binding upon all individuals.

We are able to deal so cavalierly with God the Creator as to use OMG as an expression of sarcasm only if we no longer recognize God's reality, and in that sense, our time in history has indeed killed God. We have relegated God to the margins of our consideration. We have offered lip service instead of commitment. We have behaved as if there is no absolute standard but only a pale relativism. First we convinced ourselves that we own God, then we murdered Him.

OMG! I can't believe how far from the course laid out by God we have wandered!
Oh My God, lead us back to Your way.

May the words of my mouth

And the meditations of my heart
Be as a blessing to you.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

Because I never learn from bad experience, I got into a Facebook discussion with one of my friends this week. He had posted something about the A-10 Warthog, basically a canon with wings. He was impressed by its firepower. Busybody that I am, I suggested we might do better by cultivating fewer enemies, through the teachings of the Gospel, than by building more terrifying killing machines. The conversation went like this:

Me: I dunno...maybe if we cultivated fewer enemies we wouldn't need such things?

Him: Then we could all hold hands and sing Kumbaya!

Me: I don't know about singing Kumbaya, but do you not think it would be a better place to raise children if we all held hands instead of shooting at one another? Or are you convinced that superior violence is the only possible response to a violent world? Are we confessing that the Gospel is only good for singing around the campfire in summer camp?

Him: It is what it is, and believing anything else is nothing more than a fairy tale, as unfortunate as it is..

The question I would pass to you is this: OMG! Have we murdered God by turning Him into a fairy tale?

Until we meet again,

The LORD bless you and keep you;

The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you;

The LORD lift up His face on you and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

The Bible texts of the Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel lessons are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Church of Christ in the USA, and used by permission.

The Collects, Psalms and Canticles are from the Book of Common Prayer, 1979.

Sermon Copyright © 2016 J. Stewart Schneider
