

**The Lessons Appointed for
Use on the
Fifth Sunday of Easter**



Year C
RCL

Acts 11:1-18
John 13:31-35
Psalm 148

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. *Amen.*

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.”

John 13:31-35

At the last supper, when Judas had gone out, 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.”

SERMON

By the time Jesus walked the earth, Israel had been God's chosen people for a thousand years or more. This was, and is, a very big deal. As God explained to Isaiah:

But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are
mine.

When you pass through the waters, I
will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall
not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you
shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume
you.

For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Sav-
ior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,

Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for
you.

Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you,¹

God assures Isaiah, and Isaiah assures Israel that even though they walk through rivers they shall not be overwhelmed. Even though they walk through fire they will not be burned, and God was good to his word. For a thousand years, His chosen people maintained their identity, their uniqueness. That's a big deal!

One of the ways God's chosen people were kept as a distinct nation, separate from the peoples about them, was the 613 Commandments, or "mitzvot" that all who counted themselves as heirs of Jacob honored from before the time they could speak. This, also, was and is a big deal, as Moses told them:

¹ Isaiah 43:1-4a NRSV

So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the LORD your God with which I am charging you.

You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!”

Israel understood that they were a people apart, the beloved of God, and the 613 Mitzvot were the outward sign of their position. This had been the understanding of Israel for more than a thousand years so you can just imagine how Peter’s account was received.

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?”

Peter! You are of God’s chosen people, people devoted to obedience to God’s laws. We are not to mix with unclean peoples! What are you doing? Have you no fear of God?

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.’

Doesn’t this sound familiar? God directs us to do something new and we set out to argue with Him, based on the Bible. Peter is prepared for these arguments,

though.

But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'

If God is OK with it, why would you not be OK with it, too? But that would mean that the Jewish Christians, the circumcised believers who are being critical of Peter, have to give up their position as the chosen people of God and share that distinction with Gentiles. That's asking a lot of a people whose very existence had been defined by their special relationship with God for a thousand years.

One of the theologians I read is Richard Rohr. Here's something he said once:

Jesus tried to change people by loving and healing them. His harshest words of judgment were reserved for those who perpetuated systems of inequality and oppression and who, through religion itself, thought

they were sinless and untouchable.

That's the heart of it, isn't it? We want to find our personal righteousness in being law abiding people. God wants us to do more than mechanically abide by the law. God wants us to change our entire orientation to His creation. Jesus left his Disciples with these words

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 mitzvot had welded God's chosen into a people apart who could, when the time was right, produce Jesus, the historical manifestation of God's presence in the world, and then carry that news beyond the children of Jacob into the whole world. The new thing which Jesus is bringing into the world is a change from following a set of laws which define and set aside God's cho-

sen, keeping them unified, to an attitudinal orientation to the world and all of God's children based in love. I lack the words to communicate what a big deal this new thing is!

Unfortunately, worrying about the welfare of our brothers and sisters is nowhere near as entertaining as being the avenging arm of God. If we can find a mote in the eye of a brother, we can grant ourselves permission to hate and kill. It has always been so, I'm afraid, even during Jesus' time on Earth. Maybe especially during Jesus' time on Earth. Jesus comes to offer the good news that God is more interested in a contrite heart than in self-righteousness, and the people of the time didn't buy it. They focused on the rituals and traditions they know best. Well, why wouldn't they? It's all they have ever known. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God is doing a new thing – moving the world from a

time which aspired to be law-abiding to a time to a time in which mankind would orient itself to the world in love. New things are always treated with suspicion. This time, though, God's new thing offers a hope of healing, a hope we are losing sight of in an ocean of shootings in houses of worship! Here. Now. People are killing other people as they worship! Yet, God's hope is not so easily defeated. Here's a story I ran into this week:

Went to synagogue yesterday for a friend's daughter's bat mitzvah. Arrived and saw five people holding signs by the door.

I thought, "Protesters"?

No. Muslims.

The signs read, "We're better together. We'll keep watch while you pray."

Five Muslims with signs at a Jewish synagogue acting out Peter's vision for us in the 21st Century, a time

marked by outright hatred between some who feel they are called to be God's avenging arm, as though He had not the power to do so Himself.

The Gospel, the good news, is that with the life, death and resurrection of the Christ, we have moved from pursuing good, law-abiding lives to pursuing a life oriented in love towards God's creation and God's children. That's a very big deal, church.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

The Epistle for today, from the Book of Revelation, speaks of a new heaven and a new earth. We, who would be faithful followers of God's way, must work for the birth of the new heaven and new earth. And how is that work done?

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 Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

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

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