

*Is Love Enough?*  
Easter 6B  
PPC  
9 May 2021

Acts 10:1-8, 44-48  
John 15:9-17

My Irish grandmother was a stubborn woman. I loved her dearly and miss her still but when she made her mind up about something, there was not much you could say or do to change her mind. One of her bugaboos in life was men with mustaches. She didn't hold back from telling us what she thought of that look every time a man with a mustache crossed her path. When I was teenager I discovered some old pictures of her family, and as she and I went through them, we came upon pictures of her parents. To my surprise, the picture of my great-grandfather, her father, was of a man with a mustache. He died when she was seven so perhaps that is some kind of excuse but when I pointed out to her that her father had a mustache, she remained unshakable in her opinion of mustaches. All we could do was laugh.

Ours is a world fraught with boundaries telling us who we can love and who we shouldn't love. No trespassing signs bar our way onto private property warning the uninvited to stay out. A floating rope separates the shallow end from the deep end in a swimming pool. When my parents got married there was deep-seated feeling of mistrust of my mother's family - her mother had been raised a Catholic. Until the 1960's it was against the law in some states for Blacks and Whites to intermarry. Mighty rivers, mountain ranges, or even carefully negotiated invisible borders partition the earth into nations. From fenced yards and gated communities, our fenced borders seek to keep insiders in and outsiders out. If we don't want men with mustaches to eat in a restaurant, we can put up a sign saying, "No mustaches allowed."

From an early age, we learn who “our people” are and we know what makes us different from “others”. Families, groups of friends, cliques at school, departments at work, denominations and religions, nations and alliances depend on the boundaries we have established to create and sustain themselves.

Is love enough?

The story of Peter and Cornelius is a monumental event in the life of the early church and sets rigid boundary setting askew. We are witness to a meeting that challenges these boundaries as two men from widely different communities are called together. One is a devout Jew who we learn through his dream has been faithful to dietary restrictions of his faith and a man who fears God. He journeys from Joppa to Caesarea to visit with a man who is as Gentile as a person can be but he’s also had a dream. Cornelius is a Roman centurion. Further contrasts are given as the group who come with Peter are identified as “circumcised believers”. What will this Gentile and this observant Jew have to say to one another? And yet, both have had a dream. The Spirit blows where it will!

With great fervor, after meeting Cornelius and hearing about his dream, Peter gives an impassioned sermon, bearing witness to this group of pork and shellfish eaters of the birth, death, and resurrection of a man from Nazareth, a man called Jesus. Luke writes that as Peter speaks “the Holy Spirit falls upon all who heard the word” (v. 44) and “the gift of the Holy Spirit [is] poured out even on these Gentiles” (v. 45). To the astonishment of the group of circumcised believers, after this sermon the Gentiles begin to speak in tongues and praise God. Then, despite the fact that these Gentiles are not circumcised nor do they follow the dietary rules of a devout Jew, Peter poses

the question to all present, saying, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit?” (v. 47).

Peter echoes the question that the Ethiopian eunuch asks of Philip in Chapter 8. “Look! Here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” Those who heard that story could have reacted with great agitation, shouting back, “Everything prevents you! You’re a different race, you are from a far-off country, you are a sexual misfit, and you have had very little instruction. You don’t know what it means to be a baptized Christian!” In both of these stories there are good reasons to withhold the water of baptism. Yet the Holy Spirit surprises Philip on a desert road and again that Spirit surprises Peter in a home in Caesarea, in the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion.

Love shows up in the form of the Spirit and nothing is ever the same again. It is the Holy Spirit who works this powerful transformation among the early Christians changing their perceptions of who was “in” and who was “out.” The only requirement for those actors in these stories is that they were people who were willing to be open to hear what that Spirit was saying and doing. The boundaries of the inner circle in the early church kept widening to the point where the assumed boundaries were no longer legitimate.

The Holy Spirit can be disruptive. The Holy Spirit’s purposes are often accomplished in spite of the boundaries constructed by humans. Rosemary Redford Reuther writes that the church must be organized by two principles:

- To pass on the tradition from one generation to another, and
- To be open to the winds of the Holy Spirit by which the tradition comes alive in each generation.

Sometimes, the Spirit surprises the Church and disrupts good order. Perhaps that is what is happening today as we look around in bewilderment and wonder what is happening to the church we thought we knew. Will we allow ourselves to be “astonished”? Are we able to sit in discomfort as we abide the change that has descended upon us? Or, are we a “stiff-necked” people, as God described those early Israelites. Will we be a people who are willing to open our hearts and our spirits to the wind that is blowing through the sanctuary today? Could we actually be seeing visions of the ever expanding scope of God’s grace? Do we have enough love to hear what the Holy Spirit is trying to tell us?

Are there voices from the margins that have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak the word of God in ways that challenge the boundaries of prejudice and exclusion? We may have to lay aside all we thought we knew in order to hear those voices. Will we be the astonished “circumcised” ones who are astounded at the work of the Holy Spirit in today’s scripture reading?

We struggle so with people who are different from us. In many states resistance to the building of mosques turns ugly, pitting neighbors against neighbors. Anti-Semitism is on the rise throughout the world. Here in this country feelings of nationalism bring the rise of white supremacists. How is this showing love?

We are a nation of immigrants. The first Packard to arrive on these shores in the 1600’s was a younger son who knew he would never inherit any land and thereby a means of making a living. When he arrived, because he was one of the younger sons, he had not been taught how to read or write. And while there is no family story about his

role of stealing land from the people who were already here, the laws of a foreign country allowed him the right to own land that belonged to someone else.

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Sometimes the Holy Spirit has a hard time breaking through our stubborn desires to stay the way we are. We dig our heels in firmly and refuse to be dragged away from what we have always thought was the truth. Where is the Holy Spirit trying to break through traditions that have solidified into rock? We may boast about how we have in the past served our neighbors or what a wonderful church we are because we have always valued Christian education but if those statements are no longer meaningful, then who are we? Are we people who will try to maintain a building and our old ways but will not engage in mission?

These are difficult questions with no easy answers. We must ask ourselves, however, how we will continue to pass on the tradition from generation to another while being open to the Spirit that brings tradition alive. How will our love for our church transform the mindset which keeps us stuck? How will we reflect the early church in the 21st century so that when others see us as it was written 2,000 years ago, they will say: "Look at what those Christians are doing. See how they love one another."

Will love be enough to transform us? Will love open our minds and let the Spirit blow where it will? When visitors attend church, will they look around and see worshippers who reflect the love of God in the way we treat strangers? Will they be excited about the mission work we do? These are questions that will take time to answer and cannot be answered in one sermon. We will keep up the discussion of

these questions as we gather in small groups this summer, in our Memorial Garden, in people's back yards or on Zoom.

This I do know. In the midst of chaos, the Holy Spirit blows the breath of life over us and brings order. We are invited to open our hearts and minds to the new ways of God and let go of the old boundaries that keep us penned in. We don't need to be afraid! New life arises out of our dead places. Light shines through the dark and the dust and we will be made whole.

Love will see us through.

AMEN.