

Easter 5 – Year C

Who is in, and who is out? Who belongs, and who does not?

We are in Eastertide – we get 50 days to celebrate the Resurrection – and the scriptures given us during this season invite us to let God out of the tomb. That sounds odd, but in the appearances of the Risen Lord, again and again we have the Risen Christ showing up right where we are... To the grieving Mary, Jesus the gardener appears. When the apostles are locked up in their fear, Jesus comes into the place where they are gathered. When two disciples are wearily trodding home broken-hearted, Jesus the Christ walks along with them and reveals himself in the simple act of breaking bread. When Peter and the others go back to fishing, Jesus fixes them breakfast. As he did before he died, after the Resurrection, Jesus the Christ continues to tell us that God is present right where we are. No, Jesus the Christ, the Word and Presence of God, cannot be contained by a tomb.

Oh, but we try. No sooner is Jesus gone and the disciples are spreading the good news, than some people have determined who should be “in” and who should be “out” when looking at who can be part of this new group of believers. That’s what we’re hearing about in the first reading from Acts. Peter is a good Jew. He is observant, especially about those things that are outward signs of his Jewishness. He is circumcised, and he observes the codes of purity.

As Rector Marshall Jolly puts it, “For Jews – including Peter – the observance of strict dietary laws was not a matter of ritual piety or cultural observance; it was a matter of worship and identity. In the midst of an empire that was not only non-Jewish, but also often hostile to the Jewish people, dietary observances served as a reminder to Jew and gentile alike of the distinction between those who were included in God’s covenant with Abraham and those who were not.”ⁱ The distinction between those who were included...and those who were not...

But this Easter God, the Spirit, sent by the Resurrected Christ, opens Peter's mind and heart and shows him, in that wonderful vision, that God is much more inclusive than we are. And the voice tells him, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." And so, Peter willingly goes to the house of these Gentiles when they come to get him, and he tells them the good news of God in Christ (as we all promise to do in our baptismal covenant), and the same Holy Spirit that came to the disciples comes to these Gentiles! They invited Peter and the others to stay with them for several days – and they did. They stayed in a Gentile house and *ate* with them. He entered *their* world, ate *their* food, strange as it must have seemed to him, and found God's spirit present there. And as our reading for this morning tells us, "When Peter went up to Jerusalem, the *circumcised* believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" So Peter *tells* them. And he concludes with a question we need to keep ever in front of us: "Who was I that I could hinder God?" Who am I, that I could hinder God?

Last Sunday, in the reading from Revelation, we had another hint of the expansiveness of God. We heard about "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" gathered in God's presence. Every nation, all tribes and peoples and languages. As I quoted last week from Elizabeth Palmer, writing in *Christian Century*: "God's grace is far more expansive than we would ever wish it to be!" And today, again from Revelation, we hear, "See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them... God will be with them...See! I am making all things new."

God making all things new is not always comfortable. We sometimes like things just as they are. But God is always inviting us *beyond* where we are. God is always calling us out of the tomb – "Lazarus, come out!" God is always saying to us, as Peter said to Tabitha in last week's reading from Acts, "Get up!" The Risen Christ emerged from the tomb. We cannot contain God in the confines of any list of laws or dogma or religious observances.

Jesus well understands our desire to have a way of knowing we "belong" – a way of knowing that we are identifiably one of the community. We all want to belong. But Jesus, circumcised Jew that he was, gave us a *new* way of being identified.

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” No mark on our bodies, no dietary observances that will set us apart. No, only the commandment to love. Only love will set us apart.

When I was a child, the one thing I was very aware of that set us as Catholics apart from others was that we did not eat meat on Friday. It made us *identifiable*. – It is easier to eat fish than to love.

The command to Love one another wasn't really new in and of itself. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commands of the Jewish law were, he replied that there were two: To love God, and to love one's neighbor as oneself. The command to love was already part of the religious tradition. The new part was this: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” That will give us enough to chew on for decades. Just keep asking yourself, how *did* Jesus love?

Who is in, and who is out? Who belongs, and who does not? As Peter came to learn, *all* are in. *All* belong. When we start drawing lines and making boxes, we need to hear that question again: Who are we, to hinder God?

Amen.

- [Acts 11:1-18](#)
- [Revelation 21:1-6](#)
- [John 13:31-35](#)
- [Psalm 148](#)

ⁱ Jolly, Rev. Marshall; Sermon: “The Repentance That Leads to Life, Easter 5(C) 2013” April 27, 2013.
<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/repentance-leads-life-easter-5-c-2013>