

Sermon

Easter 5C    May 18, 2025

Acts 11:1-18; Rev. 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

Over time we have been told, and have come to believe, certain things about God. We've been told and believe things like: God is love; God is patient; God is merciful; God is forgiving; God is welcoming; and probably some other definitions and descriptions. We've been told, and have come to believe, that God created all things, that Jesus was the embodiment of God in human form, and that the Holy Spirit speaks to and directs the Church.

These are things we have come to know and believe about God. And every once-in-awhile the lectionary gives a slate of readings where all three or four confirm what we know, or they give us further insight into the nature of God. Today is one of those days.

The gospel passage comes from what's known as the Farewell Discourse – that long monologue from Jesus that stretches from the time Judas leaves to betray him at 13:31 until the time when Jesus and the disciples leave for the garden at 17:26. In knowing that his hour had come, Jesus reminds the disciples what the point was of everything he did during his ministry, and it is here he says, “I give you a new commandment: to love one another as I have loved you.” We don't see this as a new commandment because we have heard Jesus say, “The greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your strength. And the second is like unto it: Love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

But Jesus never says this in the Gospel of John. He talks about love a lot, but in John this is the first time he lays it out like this – love one another as I have loved you. In that respect it is a new commandment. In this section of the gospel Jesus is preparing his disciples for his departure. He reminds them of what their priority should be in this new community – to love each other as he has loved them.

In the passage from Revelation we are given a vision of the new heaven and new earth. John hears a voice saying that the home of God is among mortals and that every tear will be wiped away. Notice that John doesn't hear that voice say, “the home of God will be with the Jews,” or, “the home of God will be with the converts.” What he hears is that the home of God will be with mortals. The God

who created humanity will now dwell with humanity – all of them; all of us. In this passage we are shown that God’s desire is to include all of humanity in all of its diversity.

In the reading from Acts we hear Peter interpret that famous vision where he saw animals, reptiles, and birds being lowered on a sheet with a voice instructing him to “kill and eat.” Peter declined to do this because he had never eaten an unclean animal. The voice then said, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

Peter ultimately interprets this vision to mean that God longs to include humanity in all of its wonderful diversity. “Anyone who does what is right,” says Peter, “is acceptable to him.” Not just the Jews. Not just converts. Not just Greeks. Not just Egyptians. Not just certain people, but everyone equally, in all our diversity, are included in God’s plan of welcome.

We, as humans, tend to want boundaries and barriers. We are asked to love others as God loves us, but we find ways to not love some people. We are asked to be merciful as God is merciful, but we consistently look for ways to inflict retribution. We are asked to be welcoming as God is welcoming, but we put limits on who we welcome.

If we believe humanity was created in the image of God, why do we not look for God in others and treat those who are different so poorly? If we believe Jesus was God incarnate, why do we not follow his command to love others as he has loved us? If we believe that the voice of God speaks to us through the Holy Spirit, why do we only seem to hear the voices of exclusion, retribution, and selfishness? And if we believe God created everything, seen and unseen, why do we treat the creation around us so poorly?

The readings today, including the psalm, point to a God who loves creation in all of its wonderful diversity, and they point to God looking to include all people equally, no matter what we think.

And before you go off on a “what about?” train of thought . . . No, it’s not a free-for-all; yes, there are expectations. Do you love your neighbor as yourself? Do you find value in God’s created diversity? Do you respect the dignity of every human being? Do you welcome the stranger? Do you publicly live what you privately proclaim?

All this, of course, is summed up by these two commandments: Love God and love your neighbor. If we do that, we will be doing our best to live into and reflect the will of God.

These readings not only point to God loving all creation, but they point to how things are meant to be. If we are doing our best to live into and reflect the will of God, we are (or should be) working to make the kingdom of God present on earth as it is in heaven. We should work to ensure our environment reflects the beauty of God. If God will wipe away every tear, can we not work to alleviate pain and suffering and crying in the world today? If Peter recognized there was no distinction between peoples, should we not be focused on our common humanity rather than exploit and exacerbate our differences?

In today's readings we get a deeper look into the nature of God. We not only get a deeper look at God, but we get a glimpse at how things could be, or as things are meant to be. And if God's desire is to welcome and include the great diversity of humanity into God's loving embrace, what's stopping us from working toward that vision in the here and now?

Amen.