

Sermon for April 24, 2016 – “Getting Out of God’s Way”

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C – Texts: Acts 11:1-18; John 13:1-2b, 3-10, 12-17, 33-35

Well, it’s been just over a month since our Easter celebration... All the Easter candy is probably gone by now...Sure, there are – technically – two more Sundays in Easter (according to the church calendar) May 1st and May 8th...But for the most part it’s largely back to business as usual – right?

I don’t know, it seems to me that it takes more than a day or two – or even a few weeks – for the full magnitude of Easter to settle in. That certainly was the case with the first Christians – the earliest ones...As well as for those that followed for the first few centuries of the Christian church....Our relatively recent liturgical calendar honors the original observance of Easter that took place for 50 days...

Which meant 50 days to spread the Good News...

50 days to proclaim resurrection to the world...

50 days to travel to far-away places with the message that God is doing a new thing in Jesus Christ.

It was during the first Easter season some 2,000 years ago that the disciples discovered that the rumors were true...That Jesus Christ had in fact been raised from the dead. And so, they wasted no time spreading that great Good News. The appropriately named Acts of the Apostles reports how the first Christians did exactly that...

They did it by teaching, preaching and baptizing many into the faith.

But – as modern-day Christians know all too well – growth (when it happens at all) cannot happen without at least a few growing pains. Now, that was as true then as it is now...And as we heard tell in our reading from the Book of Acts – Peter was no stranger to growing pains.Now – for all his faults – there was arguably no more passionate a believer in the early church than Peter. He’d been teaching and preaching about Jesus among the Gentiles (that is, non-Jews) in Caesarea with great effect. In the Book of Acts – it’s reported that the Holy Spirit came into the midst of these Caesareans and they began “extolling God.”

But even before the days of e-mail, Facebook and Twitter, rumors traveled fast in those parts...And soon, news of Peter’s work among the Gentiles reached the religious leaders in Jerusalem. They knew that Peter had been teaching and preaching...

But now they’d gotten wind that Peter was also eating with Gentiles. They summoned Peter to defend his actions.

Teaching the gentiles? Fine.

Preaching to the gentiles? Fine.

But eating with the gentiles?

Ah, no – no way! Absolutely not!

You see, for Jews – including Peter – the observance of strict dietary laws wasn’t simply a matter of ritual piety or cultural observance...It was a matter of worship and identity. Think about it – here were the Jews...They were in the midst of an occupation by an empire that was not only non-Jewish – but often hostile to Jews...

And so, dietary observances (AKA as “keeping kosher”) were beyond important – they were **crucial!** They served as a reminder to Jew and gentile alike of a very important distinction...

The distinction between those who were included in God’s covenant with Abraham and those who were **not**...This was a major reason why God had given them these rules in the first place! And so the religious leaders in Jerusalem received the news that Peter had been sharing meals with the Gentiles with mix of anger and fear.

This was serious, folks...

For them, Peter wasn’t just blurring the lines between those who were God’s people and those who weren’t – oh, no...He was forsaking God’s laws – it was just that simple. But Peter didn’t see it that way...At least, not anymore. He’d been converted.

He tells the authorities in Jerusalem the same story he'd told several times before.

He had a vision in which all sorts of animals appeared before him.

He heard God's voice telling him, **"Get up, Peter; kill and eat."**

But as a good, observant Jew, Peter replied, **"By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth."**

But then the voice of God spoke again...

It said, **"What God has made clean, you must not call profane."**

As Peter went with some friends to a nearby house – he couldn't help but think about what he'd heard the voice say. "Did I hear that right?" he must have wondered. "Surely God didn't mean that the gentiles are to be treated like us?" But then Peter remembered something Jesus had said...He remembered Jesus telling the disciples that one day soon, the faithful would be baptized...Not with water, but with the Holy Spirit.

And then, Peter asked himself one final question: "Who am I that I can hinder God?"

In other words, "Who am I to get in God's way?"

The religious leaders who'd summoned Peter to answer for himself had an interesting response...

Interesting in what they **didn't** do. They didn't respond with a long, carefully articulated theological treatise as to why Peter was in error. They didn't rebuke Peter for his actions or label him a heretic. And they didn't make a motion to enter executive session to discuss what they'd just heard so they could render a verdict.

Instead, they fell silent for a moment in awe of what God was doing in their midst.

And then they rejoiced...

They praised God for extending even to the Gentiles **"the repentance that leads to life."**

Far too often, we (that is, the church) forget that last part.

Far too often, the church forgets that – every now and then – the only worthy response to what God is doing in the world (often right in our very midst), is **not** in the form of a theological treatise...Or an official church-sanctioned statement, or encyclicals...Or in deliberations by committees or councils or assemblies...

Sometimes, the only worthy response is silence...

Silence – coupled with awe and praise.

Awe and praise for what God is doing.

When you think about it – it just kind of makes sense doesn't it? Because God is up to some amazing things with the most unexpected people in the most unexpected places...All of which leads me to wonder...And I'm wondering – now that Easter's settled into our own hearts once more and Pentecost is just over the horizon...I'm wondering if maybe our ongoing mission is to keep our eyes and hearts open – as Peter did – for the people around us who've been labeled "unclean," or "excluded," or "outsiders."

Why?

Well, because as there was in Peter's day – there are lots of people in urgent need of hearing the good news of Easter...The news that Christ is indeed risen. Because there are people who desperately need to hear that there's a "repentance that leads to life." Peter reminds us, that anytime we exclude someone...Anytime we label someone or something "unclean" for any reason...We risk of hindering God... We risk getting in God's way.

A song by the Christian group “Casting Crowns” contains these lyrics:

“People aren’t confused by the gospel – they’re confused by us.

“Jesus is the only way to God – but we are NOT the only way to Jesus.

“This world doesn’t need my denomination or my translation of the Bible – they just need Jesus.

“We can be passionate about what we believe – but we can’t strap ourselves to the gospel...because we’re slowing it down.

“Jesus is going to save the world...“But maybe the best thing we can do is to just get out of the way.”

I love that...

The first time I heard that I went, “wow!” Is it some bold stuff? Sure...But it’s absolutely dead on. Lots of well-meaning, pious religious people – pastors included – in lots of churches, do lots of things that only serve to get in God’s way.

I have two favorite quotes that I think speak to this...

The first one’s from Mark Twain – who said that “the reason most people don’t go to church is because they’ve been there.”

The other is by Gandhi – who’d been asked by missionaries why he did not embrace Christianity.

He was shrewd enough to tell them: “I like your Christ...

“I do not like your Christians. They are so unlike your Christ.”

Ouch!

It’s easy for us to gloss over – or forget altogether – that Jesus was put to death by well-meaning, pious, religious people... That would be the chief priest and the Pharisees.

The Romans saw Jesus as a threat to the emperor’s claims of divinity...and the pious, religious Jewish leaders feared Jesus’ teachings and popularity would bring about the wrath of the military might of Rome. They feared the Romans would utterly destroy Judaism as Babylonians had tried to do some 600 years before. The irony is that Rome actually came closer to doing so than Babylon.

Here’s the thing...

At best, what we do as a church should be the means by which people **encounter** the living God...It should not be – it should **never** be – an obstacle.

The danger lies in when we confuse the means with the ends. So many churches do so many things because they’ve always done them...This often goes back several generations...What’s more, these things are done in certain ways...Because that’s the way it’s always been done it...In all this, we’ve lost sight of why we began doing them in the first place! And what we’ve been led to are rigid ways of thinking and doing...

We get this laser-like focus that tells us that these are the things that we need to do...And this is the way we need to do it...And heaven help anyone – even pastors – with new ideas and suggests even the most minor changes...Or even someone who shows up to help out and – purely accidentally, mind you – deviates from the norm...I’ve heard so many horror stories from folks that I’ve served with in churches – so many of my colleagues...So much un-Christian like behavior from so many Christians....And we wonder why people have stopped coming!

We wonder why churches are closing at an unprecedented rate...

It seems to me, then, that when religious systems and practices become the end goal...

When we start talking about the right **people**, believing the right **things**, doing something the right **way**...Or going back to doing things the way we did then back then...Back in the good old days – the glory days...And that this is the only way for us to survive...Well, we can easily end up getting in God's way...

And that's exactly what Peter did – or, tried to do – at the Last Supper as Jesus washed his disciples' feet. All he really needed to do was remain silent and praise God...

All he needed to do was accept that the Lord of all creation would lower himself enough to do something that only servants did...It's a lesson in humility that we could all stand to learn.

Paul exhorted the Philippians to **“do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.**

“Let each of you look not to your own interests,” he told them, **“but to the interests of others.**

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself...

“Humbled himself...”

We might want to want to take that to heart...We might want to take a long hard look at our hearts...Our attitudes...Our motivations...Because the closer we get to the humble nature of Christ...The more we're able to check our assumptions and egos at the door...The more the Holy Spirit will be able to do amazing things. We'll be led to seek Christ and understand Christ in new ways...Not only in our religious practices...But in the faces of other people...And in the ordinary (often messy) stuff of our relationships with them. Peter eventually learned that lesson...And with the Spirit's help on Pentecost (which we celebrate in just a few weeks) – Peter gives us a glimpse of a new world...

A world in which the good news of the resurrection shatters all earthly expectations...

All parameters of clean and unclean...

Our understandings of accepted and acceptable...

The true meaning of hospitality.

Peter's Easter witness is lived through preaching and teaching and baptizing and fellowship with **all** who yearn for the **“repentance that leads to life.”**

And if we allow it – our own Easter witness can reach to the ends of the earth and to the ends of time...

Proclaiming the miraculous news that in Christ – at the end of all things – God is making all things new!

Christ is risen indeed...

Thanks be to God!

Amen and amen.