

**5 Easter Year C**

**5/15/2022**

**Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35**

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One of the things that I love about this time of year...

Easter tide...

Is that the lectionary takes us through the book of Acts.

Of course, we are reading through the book in our Adult Bible Class on Thursday nights...

Always a good conversation on that night.

I encourage all of you to spend some time reading the book.

The fifth book in the New Testament.

It is just fascinating...

Quite... good reading.

Acts of course is our reading today...

But to fully get the weight of what is going on in the story...

It is helpful to be reminded of the big story that it is a part of.

Way back in Genesis...

The scriptures proclaim that God created the heavens and the earth.

And God called it good.

When God calls something good...

Well, we should take him at his word...

And part of his good creation...

Were humans...

Male and Female, he created them.

But instead of living as God intended...

The human race chose to do things their own way.

They sinned against their Creator and brought a curse upon all of the creation.

But even in the fall of humanity...

God showed his mercy...

He declared that someone was coming to fix the problem of sin.

Someone was coming to destroy the curse.

As we read through the Old Testament, we find time after time the mercy and grace of God.

God, despite the sin and evil that constantly shapes the world we live in,

... God found a way to continue his promise to redeem his creation.

God called a man... his name was Abram at the time.

He called him to leave his own country and go to a new place...

And when God called him, he made a covenant with him.

In Genesis 12 (vv. 1-3) we read that God said:

*I will make you into a great nation,*

*and I will bless you;*

*I will make your name great,*

*and you will be a blessing.*

*I will bless those who bless you,*

*and whoever curses you I will curse;*

*and all peoples on earth*

*will be blessed through you.*

So God made a covenant with Abraham...

that through him...

a people will be created that will bless all the peoples of the earth.

And so, Abraham and his wife eventually had children...

Isaac was born...

Then Jacob was born...

His name was changed to Israel...

And he had sons...

One whose name was Joseph...

Who eventually found himself in Egypt.

After a famine...

All Israel's family moved to Egypt...

And after many, many years...

The family grew into a whole lot of people.

Egypt treated them cruelly...

And God raised up one from among them whose name was Moses.

Moses rescued the people of God from the abuse of Egypt.

It was with Moses that God gave the people of God the law...

Time went on...

The People of God grew and grew...

But they did not always obey the law of God...

Nor did they always bless the nations around them.

God sent prophets to call them back.

But the people of God did not listen to them.

Finally, when the time was right...

God the Son became flesh...

He dwelt among the people of God.

He fulfilled the law of God.

And he taught them a new commandment...

Which we heard in our Gospel reading today.

Jesus said:

*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.*

Nevertheless, he was killed...

On the cross...

Giving up himself as a ransom for us.

This was the one whom God way back in Genesis said:

Someone is coming to fix the problem of sin.

And he gave his life for us...

Defeating death...

Defeating the grave...

And three days later...

He rose victoriously from that grave.

And then he told the people of God...

the ones who followed him.

Jesus said:

*...go and make disciples of all nations,*

*baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*

*And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*

(Matthew 28.19-20)

Jesus then ascends to the Father.

And the people of God await his return.

As was described in our reading from Revelation.

That's the bible story...

But you see it is here after the ascension you have the people of God realizing the truth of scripture.

God's covenant with Abraham was to be a blessing to *all peoples on earth*.

Jesus told his followers to *make disciples of all nations*.

But early in the church...

The people of God consisted of only Jewish people.

Some liked it that way.

Some did not want change.

Some wanted things to stay the same.

But it was God...

Who instructed St. Peter in a vision of unclean animals...

and then when he ministered to non-Jewish people...

Gentiles they are called in scripture...

And God's Spirit poured out upon them too.

In our reading from Acts St. Peter says:

*So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?"*

*When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying,*

*"So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life."*

You see all through scriptures...

God is calling people from every tribe and tongue...

Every racial group...

Every ethnicity...

He is calling liberals...

He is calling conservatives...

He is calling both North and South Americans, Africans, Asians, Europeans, and even Australians...

He is calling people from all walks of life in our own community.

And we are often put in that same position as the early church...

When they said...

Wait?

God grants them repentance too?

But there not like us.

But they're different.

Jesus calls all people to come to him.

Jesus died on the cross that all may repent.

God is always expanding the people of God.

There is always room for more.

I was encouraged this last week by a Twitter thread shared by a Baptist minister and professor, Malcolm Yarnell.

He shared an experience he had years ago about the struggles he had as a young pastor.

He wrote this:

As a young pastor, I encouraged our people to tell family and friends about Jesus.

A youth leader came to ask, “Can we witness to our black friends?”

My response was, “Of course! Why not?”

Soon, a young African-American came to me for baptism.

His conversion was real.

But because he was still a minor, I approached his parents to gain permission.

Sitting in a living room with a large picture of Jesus...

thankfully they approved.

We began preparing.

Next, his older sister came forward in a church service.

She was both unmarried and expecting child.

She was truly repentant and gloriously converted.

She wept that a TV preacher encouraged her to be saved and find a church to be baptized.

Our church was two blocks away... [writes Pastor Malcolm]

I presented her to the congregation [as is the custom in that church].

The vote was positive but, sadly, many abstained.

During the next week, I discovered we had Ku Klux Klan in the church.

Secret meetings were held to try to expel me as pastor.

Fellow white pastors encouraged me to send her to a black church.

Instead, I called an African-American pastor and asked him to hold me accountable for treating all my flock equally.

He agreed, and we began meeting regularly with other pastors for prayer for everything we faced.

I preached about the sin of racism.

Some folk left the church.

The young woman asked me to speak to her boyfriend.

I did, and he too was born again!

The two were soon married.

I baptized all three of these African American believers.

But we lost so many members I was afraid we might dwindle to nothing.

Yet the church began to quickly grow.

Amazed at what God had done, I wrote my first theological essay on the scriptural response to the sin of racism.

I sent the essay to *The Christian Century*, asking if they might publish it. They said they would like to, but I must remove all references to Biblical Inerrancy.

To this day, I remain amazed at what God did in that Southern Baptist Church.

Racism in the church is real, but God is more real!

And to this day, that essay on the biblical view of racism remains unpublished.

Pastor Malcolm Yarnell ended his story with this:

Racists gonna be racist.

Liberals gonna be liberal.

Malcolm's gonna follow Jesus.

This story is both frustrating and encouraging.

It is frustrating because the whole message of the Bible is about the redemption of all creation...

About God building a people for his name from every tribe and tongue.  
And yet, we the people of God too often struggle with other Christians  
because they are different than us.

And yet it is encouraging to hear the story of a young pastor who chose  
to follow Jesus and not the ideology of cultural Christianity.

Church...

We must ask ourselves these questions...

Who do we follow?

Do we follow our particular group in this world?

Do we follow a political ideology?

Do we follow an American Christianity?

Or do we follow the Lord Jesus Christ?

St. Peter had to decide that question too.

Would he succumb to the pressures of his culture...

The pressures of his ethnic group...

Or would he follow God who was expanding the people of God...

Even to the Gentiles.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ...  
The story of the Bible...  
Is a story of grace and mercy...  
It is a story of love...  
Between God and his creation.  
And we as the people of God...  
Are called to carry out that love in this world.  
Sharing the good news of Jesus...  
His death and resurrection...  
And obeying that new commandment...  
To love one another.

St. Edward's is a place where all people can come and meet our Lord  
Jesus Christ.

A place where one can grow in their relationship with Jesus by the  
power of the Holy Spirit.

May we embrace the gift of each person who walks in this church.  
And may they always sense the love of God...  
And the love of his people.

Amen.