

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C

May 2, 2010

Acts 11: 1-8, Psalm 148, Revelation 21: 1-6, John 13: 31-35

Acts 11:1-18

{1} Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. *{2}* So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, *{3}* saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" *{4}* Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, *{5}* "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. *{6}* As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. *{7}* I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' *{8}* But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' *{9}* But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' *{10}* This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. *{11}* At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. *{12}* The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. *{13}* He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; *{14}* he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' *{15}* And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. *{16}* And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' *{17}* If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" *{18}* When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

Psalm 148

{1} Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights! *{2}* Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host! *{3}* Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars! *{4}* Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! *{5}* Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created. *{6}* He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed. *{7}* Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, *{8}* fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command! *{9}* Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! *{10}* Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds! *{11}* Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! *{12}* Young men and women alike, old and young together! *{13}* Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven. *{14}* He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the LORD!

Revelation 21:1-6

{1} Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. *{2}* And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. *{3}* And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; *{4}* he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." *{5}* And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." *{6}* Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life."

John 13:31-35

{31} When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. *{32}* If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. *{33}* Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' *{34}* I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. *{35}* By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Since I am not all that “computer savvy”, I still get much of my information about current events from TV or newspapers. As for cable television, I admit that I consult CNN, CNBC, and yes, even FOX. It turns out that apparently earlier in this week Mike Huckabee, former pastor, former presidential candidate, and possible presidential “hopeful”, “had it out” with actress and activist Rosie O’Donnell on a radio show. Among other things, they discussed same gender couples adopting children, something Mr. Huckabee opposes. Ms. O’Donnell asked, in so many words, whether his position was in keeping with his status as a minister and a Christian. In other words, is this how Christians are supposed to demonstrate their love?

By the time I heard about this, Mr. Huckabee was defending his position on another cable show by saying that, “Jesus was divisive. He was not, in fact, all-inclusive just for the sake of political correctness.”

Well, this definitely had my attention. I’ve heard that line before from other Christians who tend to be more conservative, particularly when speaking about issues of personal morality and sexuality. I began to wonder, short of throwing the TV out the window, how I might respond to such a statement. It turns out that our first reading from the *Acts of the Apostles* as well as today’s Gospel helped point me in a certain direction.

In calling Jesus ‘divisive’, Mr. Huckabee was correct, but for the wrong reasons. Here’s why. At least as I read and understand the Gospels, one would be hard pressed to find an incident where Jesus did not welcome those who were excluded by polite and religious society. In fact, one of the most frequent criticisms about Jesus was the company He kept: sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, those with leprosy, widows, the demon possessed, women of questionable circumstances, etc. “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” These were “the least”, “the last”, “the lost”.

Now, not one of those who were being excluded by most of society and yet welcomed by ever claimed that Jesus was being “divisive”. Most, if not all, of the time they were absolutely thrilled and grateful for a status they were never given by others. If Jesus was labeled “divisive” by anyone, it was by the religious and political elite, by those who were entrenched in “the way things were”, by those who thought they had God and the world all figured out, by those who claimed to be following the Bible. In addition, Jesus’ harshest and most severe words and judgments were *always* for the religious leaders whom, I suspect, He thought “should know better”. Biblically speaking, then, Jesus was “divisive” to the Pharisees, the Scribes, the Lawyers, the High Priest, and certain

political figures. *They* decided Jesus was “divisive” because His vision, mission, and ministry failed to measure up to their standards or threatened the *status quo*.

Jesus’ ministry of mercy, grace, and inclusive love did not end with His death. In fact, the Resurrection is God’s “ratification” of all that Jesus said and did. The Resurrection proves, as St. Paul says in the *Letter to the Romans*, that “nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus.” (see Romans 8: 31-39)

One of the “themes” or “threads” I detect throughout the *Acts of the Apostles* is the ever widening “circles” in which God’s love and the presence and power of the risen Christ were expanding. This continuing power and presence of the risen Christ tended to “show up” among some very unexpected, unlikely, and highly questionable types of folks. In chapter 8, Simon the magician is brought “into the fold, hardly a likely or expected candidate. We then hear how the Gospel message takes hold among Samaritans. Then followed the story about the deacon Phillip’s evangelism and baptism (at God’s command) of the “Ethiopian eunuch, a “consummate outsider” if ever there was one. Then comes the story about God’s choice of a certain Saul of Tarsus, and then the story about the Spirit “infusion” and Baptism of Cornelius and his family, who were Gentiles. See a pattern here? See any “divisiveness”?

In today’s first reading, we hear Peter’s explanation and even defense before a reluctant and skeptical Church about what *God* was *already* “up to” among “those people”.

A brief digression. Most of the earliest followers of Jesus were devoutly Jewish and probably better versed in and serious about their “Bible” than the average citizen. In fact, they were considered quite a bit “out there” by those among the Jewish people who did not accept Jesus as Messiah. So, these folks had clearly gone beyond the “conventional” understandings of Scripture, but apparently had not gone far enough. Even these “outsiders” were convinced that the Bible told them that Gentiles were “unclean” by nature and that it was forbidden to eat with them or allow them to join the community unless they “changed” (became circumcised and Jewish). In the reading we heard today from the *Acts of the Apostles*, something very “revolutionary” was occurring. St. Peter was changing, developing, and challenging his previous understanding of scripture based upon what he was experiencing in the community, and based upon what he was convinced was God’s activity, even among “those people”. Hmmm. Usually, most folks tended to begin with a certain understanding of the Bible and

then tried to make reality conform to that understanding, rather than being challenged by what was happening all around them. Some of our Bible loving brethren today would consider such an approach to be heretical.

One of the commentaries I consulted wisely pointed out the command to love issued by Jesus in today's Gospel reading could not have come at a worse time. Although our lectionary did not clarify the "he" in verse 31 (When *he* had gone out...), I intentionally supplied the name of Judas in my public proclamation. What does Judas have to do with all this, you might ask. Well, Judas left because he was going to betray Jesus and put into motion the series of events that would end with His arrest, trial, and execution. It was a time of uncertainty, fear, insecurity, confusion, and even failure. Yet, at just that most unlikely time, to a highly unlikely crew of bumbling and weak fools, Jesus offered the command to love.

It is no different today. Jesus commands us to love in circumstances and situations that are uncertain, even when we are feeling insecure and fearful, and when we do not necessarily have the time and luxury to figure it all out.

Just as it was for those first disciples, we will frequently get it wrong. Sometimes we will even get in the way. We won't always be thrilled.

The good news is that none of that stops God.

Let us pray. There's wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea; there's a kindness in God's justice which is more than liberty. For the love of God is broader than the measures of our mind; and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind. But we make this love too narrow by false limits of our own; and we magnify its strictness with a zeal God will not own. (*ELW* 588, vv. 1a, 3)

AMEN.