

Gospel: John 13:31-35

After washing the disciples' feet, predicting his betrayal, and then revealing his betrayer, Jesus speaks of his glorification on the cross. This deep complicated love of Jesus, even to death on the cross, will be the distinctive mark of Jesus' community.

³¹When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³Little 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.'³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

First Reading: Acts 11:1-18

In defense of his earlier baptism of pagan believers, Peter demonstrates to the members of the Jerusalem church that God's intention to love Gentiles as well as Jews is revealed in Jesus' own testimony. In this way the mission to the Gentiles is officially authorized.

¹Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" ⁴Then 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. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.'⁸But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The 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. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.'¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'¹⁷If 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?" ¹⁸When 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."

This story actually happened at another congregation, not here at Christ the Redeemer. Not this last Sunday, but a few years ago, when the congregation was preparing to recognize Mother's Day, it was decided that, like we did last week with a carnation, a rose would be given to all mothers. However, a little controversy arose when one person became very concerned of how that ushers would identify who the mothers were, to make sure the flower was not given to somebody who wasn't actually a mother. How will they know? What if they gave one to somebody who wasn't a mother? It took a while to weed through all of that.

Here's another one. A parent was upset a number of years ago, because a classmate of her daughter in the confirmation program had missed a number of sessions because this student's parents were involved in a shared custody program. What she was really concerned about was not that this student had missed many things due to the situation but was upset because maybe her daughter could have stayed home more from the class. In other words, she wasn't worried about whether the student who had missed some sessions would come up short, but instead was wondering if her daughter could have done less.

Why does it seem that often what gets us worked up not only in life, but even in church where we recognize that we lean on the very grace of God, that we are worried that somebody is getting something for free? In our humanity, we often seem to focus on making sure no one gets in that doesn't "deserve" it.

Now, before we get off track here, there are certainly times when we need to practice good stewardship so that our God given resources are not wasted. This is certainly important and not meant to be diminished here.

Even as a congregation we have to make those necessary decisions sometimes in the office. When we are mailing out letters and materials to our members? Do you mail to people who moved several years ago but never took their name off the roster, but yet who we know will not be impacted by what we are sending out? When do we say “yes” to doing this when do we say “no” around these types of issues that arise? So, this type of discernment is always a factor in things, but I am not speaking to that. So aside from the important stewardship issue, it seems that we still worry about people, even more than the finances of it all. How come this person gets included? We are often more worried about who is included than who is excluded. Even when it comes to social programs, the first thing that people often seem more worried about is that someone is getting something for nothing and how do we stop it.

Even in faith, why are we always worried about who shouldn't come to the table? I know of some denominations that seem to be more focused upon who doesn't get to come to the Lord's table than about welcoming the newcomer.

The apostle Peter is faced with this same type of thing in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Here is the setting: The disciple Peter, whom no one would certainly minimize as one of the major disciples of Jesus, has experienced the risen Christ and since then has begun to spread the word about how the Messiah had come and was among them was crucified, died and was buried in three days was alive again. He is out spreading this Gospel when he comes across Gentiles, those outside the Jewish faith, will also seek the risen Lord. Peter is hesitant about this. Peter himself wrestles with us. But as we hear about in this important book

of the Bible, Peter has a dream in which it becomes very clear to him that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is for every single human being regardless of their background and condition in life. So, he baptizes them in the name of the risen Christ. Meanwhile back in Jerusalem, where the church is being built in terms of followers, in the holy city where all the major events of Jesus unfolded, word gets back that Peter, of all people, is ministering to the Gentiles. This does not go over well and leads to the confrontation we heard about in our lesson. The ending is that the believers hear what Peter has to say, and how he witnesses not only to the dream he had, but also recounts the words of Jesus himself. He concludes with these words: "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?" It is then that there is praise given to God and it is recognized and established that Jesus Christ is for all human beings on this earth.

We too, with the gift of hindsight, can go back and read the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, and when we do so, what we discover is that this man from Nazareth, when encountering those who were considered outside of the faith, those who were pushed to the edges of society, those who the world believed did not count - did not count for them, did not count in the eyes of God, Jesus admires, welcomes and loves.

Even looking back at the very beginning, the visit of the magi to this infant Christ child signals something. These magi, who we're not likely Jewish, in fact they probably represented other world religions, but they come and recognize a new born king. When we look at Jesus and his encounters with prostitutes, tax collectors, the unclean, those possessed, lepers, those regarded as sinners, women, Samaritans, Roman soldiers,

Gentiles from other places and lands, what we discover in every single case is that Jesus widens the door of God's inclusion, God's love, and God's acceptance. In every single case. Then there is humanity. From those earliest of followers in Jerusalem that we heard about in today's text, down through the ages until today - unfortunately in our darker moments of history - in the church we have tended to have been more focused on who needs to remain outside the church doors, instead of looking to the Gospel and witness of Jesus Christ.

We readily and repeatedly in the church sing "Amazing Grace that saved a wretch like me" and that is wonderful to hear, know, and experience, but when it saves as wretch like you, we are not so sure. Even as faithful believers sometimes, we are unsettled when we sing that same Amazing Grace that saves a wretch like _____ and then we fill that blank in with someone who we believe is outside of God's encompassing circle of love. Then we find ourselves once again wrestling with the notion of who's in and who's out. We find ourselves struggling with the force of grace.

It simply is not our job to do God's pruning, God's weeding, God's sorting. But we do have a role and that role comes from the very lips of Jesus in our Gospel text: "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." Amen.