

That is Church
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
Date: May 13, 2012

16:04

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." [1] Seems pretty simple, right? No wrestling with what Jesus meant by this one. Just as Jesus loved us, we are to love one another. But what if we just don't like each other? What if we are so different, that we can't see eye to eye on anything? I can go on and on with excuses of why we may not be able to love one another, but that glaring commandment Jesus gave us remains . . . "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." [2]

For the disciples, this commandment was tested, and they tried to find an escape clause. Because who did Jesus mean for us to love? Well, fellow believers, sure, we can love them. Fellow Jews even if they don't feel the same way about Jesus as we do? Fine, we can love them too. But should we love Gentiles? Even Gentiles who believe in Jesus?

This was a harder question. This was a question that the earliest followers of Jesus had to wrestle with, and this is what we see Peter confront head on in our scripture from the Acts of the Apostles. It was the big question—the Gentile question. Gentile by the way just means "non-Jew." So one of the major questions facing the early followers of Christ was what to do with these non-Jewish converts to the Jesus Movement.

Paul was the Apostle to the Gentiles and he was adamant about their full inclusion into the community. Paul breaks bread with and spread the Gospel to Gentiles, even Jesus never ate with Gentiles! Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners—he shared the table with people considered to be the lowest of the low among the Jewish populace, but Jesus never ate with non-Jews. [3] It was a big deal when Paul did this, part of the reason he became known as the Apostle to the Gentiles.

But here we have Peter, the right hand man of Jesus himself, speaking to the crowds. While he's still speaking, "the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles." [4] Did you pick up on this discrimination? They can't believe the gifts of the Spirit would be given even to the Gentiles, far beneath them, far inferior in some of their eyes. But they were.

"What do we do now?" I can imagine these early disciples turning to Peter like deer in headlights, frozen to the spot, not able to comprehend what just happened. Peter recovers, well baptize them! Who are we to withhold the waters of baptism from them? And then here's the new turning point in the story, these new believers invite Peter to stay with them for several days. And he accepts. He stays in their homes and he eats with their families, he celebrates their inclusion into the community and I'll bet they had quite a party and created a true community in this time they spent together.

Yvette Flunder, a UCC minister in San Francisco, who serves an inner city church where she says, "marginalized communities have always been overrepresented" calls on all of us as Christians to practice radical hospitality and therefore create true communities. The quote I love from her book, *Where the Edge Gathers*, is this, "Tolerance must move to acceptance, acceptance to affirmation, and affirmation to celebration." [5] It's worth repeating, "Tolerance must move to acceptance, acceptance to affirmation, and affirmation to celebration." [6]

This is so brilliant, and is exactly what happens in the early community in Acts. Peter goes from tolerating the Gentiles, sort of, to accepting them, to affirming them by baptizing them, and then ultimately to celebrating with them as new believers by breaking bread together. Moving from tolerance to acceptance to affirmation to celebration in some ways is how the faith began to spread because people saw that these followers of Jesus loved all people in ways they maybe hadn't experienced before, and that was worth celebrating!

I'll give you a rather funny example of this at work. In my worship class in seminary, we would often start class with a hymn. People would sometimes shout out a request and we'd leaf through our New Century Hymnals and find that hymn, singing it together. One day someone shouted out a request, and I'm not telling you what hymn because I don't want you to be biased towards this hymn.

No one groaned or complained about this request except our professor. She proclaimed, "Oh, I hate this hymn, it drives me crazy." The student who requested it looked a little defeated, but our professor quickly recovered herself. Here's what she said, "It's true that I hate this hymn. But if you love it, I'll sing my heart out because you're my brother in Christ and I love you for that. That, my friends, is church." I will never forget that moment. Singing a hymn you hate with gusto because your brother in the community loves it and you love him, that is church. Not making it all about you all the time and your needs, but the needs of others, that is church. Making a sacrifice, taking one for the team for the greater good, that is church.

So you'd think that after Peter has this revelation of affirmation and celebration of these new believers, the other leaders would have patted him on the back and congratulated him, right? Well unfortunately institutions and people in power in those institutions can be a little slow to change. Peter has to appear before a Council held in Jerusalem. Their major question, the first question they ask him is, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"[7] I told you it was a big deal!

Peter explains himself, he explains his actions, by saying, "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?"[8] Eventually the community comes to the consensus that they really are called to love all people, including Gentiles. Peter and Paul, for that matter, are vindicated, and the rest is history.

I so wish this were the end of our story and we could go home now completely happy and content. But it's not that easy. Once these amazing, life altering teachings of Jesus got codified and the Bible became canonized, in the words of Larry Rasmussen, a professor at Union Seminary, "Stability won out over change, hierarchy prevailed over egalitarianism, male-held-office triumphed over gender equality, power was more centralized than dispersed, and social, political, and economic privilege lodged with the few rather than the many."[9] It was so good, but then things got a little side tracked there for awhile, hence the various Reformations that have taken place in the Church.

There are major movements in churches today to go back to the practices of the Early Church. It's now very cool and hip to say that your church is trying to get back to the roots of our faith by practicing the faith we can see in the Acts of the Apostles. I understand this mindset, and I admit to sometimes doing this myself. Some of the ancient practices are amazing and should be introduced to all of us today.

But I think ignoring the messy middle part of our history also discounts that there were some moments and movements in the history of Christianity, even during periods of violence and struggle that are worth celebrating. There have been times when the call to love one another

has conquered the need to dominate or present ourselves as better than anyone else and therefore exclude "the other."

And I'll give you an unlikely example, the Church of St. Martin's in Biberach, Germany in the 1500s. We all probably learned in school that Martin Luther's 95 Theses nailed to the church door in Wittenberg happened in 1517. Yet in 1548, only 31 years after Luther's reform began, when Germany had a whole lot of division between Roman Catholics and Lutherans, Biberach passed an unlikely town edict called "simultaneous church." The Catholic emperor of the time lacked the military might to rid Biberach of all the Lutherans, so they decided to have a biconfessional church.

St Martin's has two naves, one Lutheran and one Roman Catholic. From one direction the church looks Protestant by depicting Biblical scenes and the life of Jesus. From the other direction it looks Roman Catholic by having pictures of church fathers, saints, popes, and the Virgin Mary. The town leaders even worked out a specific worship schedule in 1649. Catholics used the church from 5-6 AM, Lutherans from 6-8, Catholics from 8-11, Lutherans again from 11-12, and then Catholics from 12-1 PM. Diana Butler Bass explains, "Unlike other cities in Europe, Protestant and Catholic neighbors passed one another in the church doors on the way to their sacred services." [10]

Today this isn't so strange, communities share worship spaces quite often, but Lutherans and Catholics in Germany in the 1500s sharing the same church? This is so remarkable, and at the time it was probably rather unbelievable. And St. Martin's remains to this day the oldest "simultaneous church" still active in Germany.

I can imagine Peter and Paul and Jesus, of course, smiling over this one. The love commandment, that we are called to love one another just as Jesus loves us conquered the unrest or distrust or even hatred in this community. People came together united in their faith in Christ, no matter what form that faith took. I guess we should remember in the words of Paul that "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." [11] And that, my friends, is church. Amen.

[1] John 15:12

[2] John 15:12

[3] David M. Freidenreich, "Food and Table Fellowship" in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 523.

[4] Acts 10:44

[5] Yvette Flunder, *Where the Edge Gathers: Building a Community of Radical Inclusion*, 25.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Acts 11:3

[8] Acts 17

[9] Larry Rasmussen, "Shaping Communities" in *Practicing our Faith*, 127.

[10] Diana Butler Bass, *A People's History of Christianity*, 251.

[11] Galatians, 3:28