

Year C – Fourth Sunday in Easter – May 18, 2025

Pastor Megan Floyd

John 13:31-35; Acts 11:1-18

Grace and peace to you in the name of our risen savior, Jesus Christ, who commands us to love more widely than we can imagine. Amen.

What an incredible day of celebration! So beautiful and fun!

And yet... some of us are still reeling from that storm that crossed our state on Thursday night and into Friday.

There's been damage here in our community, but also extensively across the state.

Recovery and repair efforts are underway... and in Christ's love, we hold those most affected in the embrace and prayers of our community... helping where we can through our prayers... and our actions.

We do this... because it's who we are as disciples of Jesus... we love our neighbors as Christ loves us... and sometimes that love looks like cutting up fallen trees and cleaning up broken glass.

Life is better for everyone when we let our love for others guide us...

And that, too, is worth celebrating.

So, this is, indeed, a Celebration Sunday!

And the Holy Spirit has gifted us with some beautiful scripture to accompany our celebration.

We hear in our Gospel today, our Lord Jesus, commanding us to love each other as Christ loves us.

If you were here on Maundy Thursday, you would have heard this text then as well. It's very important, and so we hear it again.

Jesus said to us... Love one another as I have loved you.

Let your love for others be a defining characteristic of who you are... be known for it... and let your radically abundant love identify you as one of my disciples.

And know that the love you have does not originate with you... it comes from Christ and flows *through* you... This is how we love.

And from Acts, we have an important vision... Peter is deep in prayer while he's waiting for lunch... he's hungry...

And he sees a large sheet being lowered in front of him, and on it, he sees all manner of animals that, as a Jewish man, he would have been prohibited from eating because it would have rendered him unclean.

Along with the vision comes a voice from God telling him to kill and eat...

Peter would have been horrified... maybe even repulsed... because he had been taught all his life that these animals were not for eating... they were common... profane.

But the voice insisted... and said that what God has made clean, he must not call profane.

God is doing a new thing here.

And then, the Holy Spirit tells him to go to the home of a Roman centurion – a commander in the Roman army who was also a follower of Jesus – but... this man was a Gentile.

The Jewish people kept themselves apart and would have avoided mixing with the Gentiles...

And even those who followed Jesus... well, they thought they had something of a special club, exclusive to those who also follow Jewish law.

...they certainly would not have accepted an invitation to a meal in the home of a Roman for many reasons, but foremost, there would have been no way to confirm that it was in accordance with their dietary rules.

So... trusting in the Holy Spirit... Peter goes to Cornelius' home, where he learns that he, too, was visited by God and told to invite Peter to come to his home... to hear what Peter could teach him.

Peter begins to speak... to share the good news... and he witnesses the Holy Spirit fall upon this Gentile and his household

And in that moment, Peter understood that God shows no partiality, and that the gift of this life with Christ... the saving love and grace that is Christ's alone to give... is meant for all people.

It certainly seems... that God is doing a new thing.

But our passage is actually from Peter's retelling of these incredible events... he is recounting the story for the others because they are upset with him for going.

They are criticizing him for going to Cornelius' home and eating with him... he is being called forward to explain why he would do such an unlawful thing.

And we can hardly blame them... their rules and way of life, given to them by God, have governed their lives for thousands of years.

They are known to others by these rules.

And yet... it was clear that God is doing a new thing. God is not saying that the former rules were bad, or wrong...

Only that it is time for something new... It's time to eliminate the exclusivity of their religious club and accept people whom they would not have previously accepted.

It's time to break down the barriers and welcome all... to allow all their different cultures and backgrounds to become part of the beautiful tapestry of life that belongs to Jesus Christ...

To celebrate... that there is no one beyond God's love, and therefore no one should be excluded from our love.

Do we think this was easy for them to do? Absolutely not!!

These folks were human... and they were pretty set in their ways... and just like us today, they had prejudices and aversions...

There's a reason we are still talking about Jesus's command to love others as Christ loves them...

We still struggle... we still put up barriers around ourselves to keep out those who are different... those who will disrupt our ways.

We push back against God's call to open our hearts, our minds, and our communities to those who are different... different habits, different foods, different ages... different ways of worship... anything...

Difference is disruptive, and we like things to be the same... set... calm.

But God is always making things new... all around us, God is always renewing us ... always calling upon us to love more... and to welcome those who are not already in the room...

to not just widen our boundaries around who we love but to eliminate the boundaries altogether.

...because we are called to love as Christ loves us, and we will never meet another person whom God does not love.

We come together as a community of faith, because we seek to know Jesus... to follow Jesus and to conform ourselves to the ways of Jesus...

And so we must love like Jesus.

We must love others and welcome others in such a radical way that we become known for our love...

Love in such a way that we can overcome the discomfort of difference...

Love in such an open way that we leave room in our hearts to be surprised by the gift that the Holy Spirit has for us in our newfound relationships.

Loving this way will change you... it will renew you... every day

Peter did not insist that Cornelius and his household convert to Judaism before agreeing to meet with him... before agreeing to include them in the Way of Christ.

No... Peter saw that God was including Cornelius and his household exactly as they were... and so very wisely, Peter observed... who am I, that I could hinder God?

Who are we... that we could hinder God?

When we exclude other people because they aren't like us... we cause harm...

We hurt those we have excluded... but we also harm our own hearts by rejecting the gift of relationship that is offered through Christ's command to be loving and inclusive.

And so, we love in such a way that leaves room for others to become the fullest, most beautiful version of themselves...

And in so doing, we are also made new... drawn closer to the heart of Christ... closer to the love that Christ has for all the world.

And we give our thanks and praise... for in our becoming new... in our blooming... our God is glorified.

This is truly something we can celebrate today!

In a short while, Abby, Isaak, Kara, and Maddie will publicly affirm their baptismal promises.

They are proclaiming that they choose to continue in their journey with Christ... the journey that began with their baptism.

But... then what... what does that really mean?

Well, it means... that you will be known for your love... for the way you include those who are excluded...

...for the way you lift others up so they can see themselves, and love themselves, as Christ sees and loves them...

It means that you will let the love of Christ shine through you... that you'll be Christ's light in the darkness, and no darkness will overcome it.

It means that by this love, you and all around you will know that you belong to Jesus, and that every day, Jesus is doing a new thing... through you.

Do I think this will always be easy?

Nope... it won't...

But that's why we come back together again and again, to receive Christ's forgiveness and grace, and be renewed by Christ's love through all these folks around you.

...We come together to remember how much we are loved... to see ourselves as God sees us, and allow God's vision to work in us... so we, too, can become the fullest, most beautiful version of ourselves.

Because the truth is... God is always doing a new thing... making all things new, including you.

That's definitely something to celebrate today! Amen.