

Overcoming Fear with Love

B-Easter 6: Acts 10:44-48

Robert Woody, 5/6/18

Sermon-in-a-Sentence: We are called by God to love not only our friends but strangers and even those who are scary for us to love.

Adult Sermon:

In John's Gospel, chapters 13 through 17 are all about Jesus' "Last Supper" with his disciples. After washing their feet, he gives a *pretty long* sermon, 4 ½ chapters. And one of the main themes of his final address to his disciples, just before he is arrested and crucified, is **love**.

Love is the focus of last week's reading about Jesus as the vine and his disciples as branches, with love flowing through Jesus, the vine, and through the branches, his followers, so that they can bear fruit among the people they love. This week we hear the "great commandment," the second time. He repeats in chapter 15, what he said at the beginning of his "sermon" in chapter 13 (John 13:34-35).

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."
(John 15:12-13)

So, who are we supposed to love? Jesus seems to be talking to the disciples about loving "each other," and their "friends." But the word translated in English as "friends" is actually an extension of one of the Greek words for love, "phileo." He is not really referring to those we know well and like, as friends. He is referring to those who we are **willing** to love, even if we don't know them well. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for [someone you are willing to love]" He is talking about being willing to lay down our lives for those we are **trying** to love, even those who may not be our actual "friends." Maybe those we don't really know, or even those who we have been separated from in our society or culture.

Our reading from Acts, I think, really resonates with this idea of reaching out to, and loving those, who are not normally our "friends." Our reading is actually the climax of a much longer story. Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and a Gentile, who was a devout man who prayed often, had a vision, and heard an angel tell him to send some of his men to the village of Joppa, about 30 miles away, to the house of Simon the tanner, and to ask Simon's guest, Simon Peter, to come to Cornelius' home.

In the meantime, Peter also a vision from God up on the roof. A voice was asking him to eat some animals, which in the Jewish tradition were considered profane and unclean. And then Peter heard a voice, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." He heard this three times, and his head was spinning.

At that moment, Cornelius' men arrived. The Spirit told Peter to follow them, so he agreed to go with them back to Caesarea, and he brought several friends.

When he first met Cornelius, Peter said, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean," (remembering the vision he had seen on the roof.)

Cornelius then shares with Peter the vision he had seen, ultimately telling him to send his men to Joppa to find Peter. And Peter responds, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." And then, Peter tells the story of Jesus, his ministry, his death and his resurrection. And that's where our reading comes in:

"While Peter was 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**, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days."
(Acts 10:44-48)

Now when the other apostles heard this story, and Peter showed up in Jerusalem, they severely criticized him for hanging out with, and eating with, and *especially* baptizing Gentiles. But then Peter told the whole story – the visions, the Spiritual voices. The apostles were stunned, and silenced, and said, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life." (Acts 11:18)

For those who are taking on the Curry Challenge and reading the book of Acts, you know that the problem of early Jewish Christians and the apostles being willing to love and accept the Gentiles, continued for a long time. This story of Peter and Cornelius and the story last week of Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch were only the beginning.

But now the problem is **solved!** All Christians love everyone! We love even non-Christians, non-Americans, foreign immigrants.

Not really.

Our culture, our society, our nation, even our religion has taught us who we should love, and who we should fear, and ignore or avoid, *i.e.*, not love. Like Peter, we are being taught that certain people are "profane and unclean." We should avoid them, build walls to keep them away from us.

It is sometimes scary. Can we really trust the stranger, people of another race or religious tradition? And like Peter, we know that if we do reach out and try to love them, and become vulnerable in the process of loving them, it could backfire.

We will probably be criticized and condemned, even by our friends and family, and maybe our fellow Episcopalians, for doing something they see as stupid, to reach out to someone who we may see as dangerous.

Too often we clothe ourselves with fear, rather than love.

I had a young couple come by the office this week, looking for money to buy food, and needing a place to stay. I invited them into my office and visited a bit. I wasn't sure, but I felt like they were probably legitimate. So I offered to let them stay in our guest house, and I gave them \$30 to buy some food. I checked with Julie to see if we had any Airbnb guests coming and she said no, and she was Ok with me bringing them to our guest house. They had come to Rec on some old bikes, so I put the bikes in my trunk. I got to know them a little bit as I drove them to our home.

It **was** a little scary. I wanted to trust them, but I was afraid they might trash the place or steal some household goods or furniture. They had to catch a bus early the next morning, so I didn't get to see them again. But they did fine. They left the guest house in good shape.

It doesn't always work. We have welcomed some homeless guests in the past who have smoked in the guest house, and trashed it.

I think fear is the biggest obstacle to love. When we are faced with issues like dealing with immigrants, we have to be willing to overcome fear, if we are going to follow Jesus' Way of Love. If we focus on fear, we should build a wall and deport all the Dreamers.

Yes, a few may be dishonest or exploitive, but the vast majority are fleeing from situations where their kids and family are at risk. They need our love and support. But love is not easy. Especially when it's scary.

Peter took a huge risk, following the strangers who knocked on his door, to another city. He took a huge risk even entering the centurion's home. And he took a huge risk baptizing Gentiles. He knew that his fellow apostles would harshly criticize him for reaching out to and loving Gentiles. But Peter overcame his fear with love.

I am so proud of this faith community of Reconciliation. We have, so many times, overcome our fears with love. In the late 60's, we welcomed Vietnam veterans when they were feared and hated by many churches. In the next decade, we welcomed divorcees, who were feared and condemned. We welcomed 12 Steppers when every other church in San Antonio feared and refused them. We welcomed our gay and lesbian, brothers and sisters, who were outcasts in most faith communities. We have welcomed disabled children and adults, even if they are sometimes rowdy or disruptive.

Every time we have stretched, it's been a little scary. But we have chosen over and over to overcome fear with love.

My second Sunday at Rec, back in the fall of 2002, I was asked to baptize the child of a gay couple. That would have never happened in the church I came from. I almost freaked out. I was afraid I might get kicked out of the diocese as a priest. But everybody at Rec seemed to be OK, so I did it.

And I'm still here, and now I'm a real Reconciler.

This journey and challenge of overcoming fear with love never ends. We don't know right now what the new challenges will be in the future. But they will come. Some are probably lying on our doorstep right now who we haven't noticed yet.

But we will be the Church of Reconciliation. We will do our best to follow Jesus' command that we love one another, as Jesus has loved us.

Amen.