

## Love is First

C-Easter 5, Acts 11:1-18, John 13:31-35 – 5/19/19

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### Children's Sermon:

What did Jesus think was the most important thing that we, his followers, could ever do? Just before Jesus was crucified on the cross, when he was having his **last** dinner with his disciples, his followers, he gave them his last and most important commandment:

- “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.”

How do people know that you are a **real follower of Jesus**?

- You can say that you are a “Jesus follower” or a “Christian.”
- You can say you **believe** all the right things.
- You can **come to church** regularly.
- You can **read your Bible** every day.

All of those are good things to do. But they are not what Jesus said was **most important**: The most important thing is for us to **“Love one another.”**

What does it mean to “love one another”? What would it look like if you loved each other? What would it look like if you **didn't love** each other? What would it look like to love your family? What would it look like if you were **not loving** your family?

Even when it's **hard**, do we still have to **love one another**? Yes, according to Jesus, if we want to be his followers, even if it's hard.

The most important thing we do at Reconciliation is to be **“a follower of Jesus.”** And how do we become a real “follower of Jesus”? We love one another. Everyone. **We love one another.**

Adult Sermon:

It's very ironical that on my next to last sermon at Rec, I have two of my most favorite readings from the Bible. First from our Gospel, Jesus reminding his disciples – I'm sure he had told them this many times before – but as he was drawing near to his last physical presence with his followers – reminding them, that the most important thing, is that **they love one another**.

The thing that would make them real Jesus followers; the thing that would make their relationships and ultimately, the church flourish; the thing that would connect them to the world: **Love one another**. Despite all our differences.

And I love the story of Peter and Cornelius from Acts. Peter grew up as a faithful Jew; and then became a follower, a disciple of Jesus. After Jesus had died and was resurrected, Peter had a very strange vision, while he was praying, with lots of surprises. A sheet lowered from heaven with four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles and birds – all things that real Jews were not allowed to eat. But he heard a voice saying, "Kill and eat."

Following his religious tradition, Peter said, "No Lord; nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my lips." And then he heard the voice again, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

"What God has made **clean**, you must not call **profane**." This vision happened three times. Think God was trying to stretch Peter (and maybe all of Christianity), to accept things and love people they had never loved before?

Then, with his head still spinning, another surprise happened. The servants of Cornelius, the Gentile, who lived in Caesarea, showed up at Peter's door and asked Peter to go with them to visit Cornelius. Peter heard a voice saying, "Go with them and do not make a distinction between them and us," between Jews and Gentiles.

What? Was he supposed to do inappropriate things, and break rules he had been taught from childhood?

When he arrived, Peter said to Cornelius and his guests, "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." Anyone, not even Gentiles.

So Peter told them the story of Jesus, his ministry, his death and his resurrection. And as Peter told the story, they were suddenly surprised by the Holy

Spirit descending upon Cornelius and his family and servants. And because of what happened, Peter baptized them, **even though they were Gentiles**. And even though the Church at that time would say it was inappropriate and would have condemned Peter.

When Peter returned to Jerusalem, he was condemned, and deeply criticized by his fellow disciples and other Jewish Christians for accepting and baptizing Gentiles. So he told them the whole story, and all of the surprises he had experienced. The vision of the sheet lowering with all the unclean animals. And then what he had heard God's voice saying: "What God has made **clean**, you must **not** call **profane**." And he told them about his journey to Caesarea, and the surprise of the Holy Spirit falling upon Cornelius, the Gentile, and his family and servants, as they were being baptized.

When they heard the story, they were shocked and silenced. And "they praised God, saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.'"

From my perspective, this story is not just about including Gentiles into Christianity. This is another example of **stretching** to love our neighbors. All of them. Near and far. Not just fellow Jews, not just Gentiles, but all our neighbors.

From my perspective, we all worship the same God. Jews, Muslims, Buddhists. All our religions have the same Golden Rule: Love God and love your neighbors.

Again, it is so ironical. It was probably God's plan, clearly not mine, that on the week I would preach on these two Scripture readings: Jesus commanding his followers to: "Love one another;" and the Holy Spirit coaching Peter to accept people he had always condemned, to accept and love a Gentile -- that Julie and I would be invited to a dinner on Monday night with our LGBTQ Reconcilers (the ones I was taught as a Baptist, were all demon possessed). We gathered to celebrate and give thanks for how they have been welcomed and loved at Rec. We shared lots of stories and tears about how Rec has loved and welcomed **everybody**.

We aren't perfect yet, but we, a community of Reconcilers, are willing **and continuing** to stretch, to figure out how to love all our neighbors.

And as I was writing this sermon during the week, our RMI friends, coming from lunch in Brown Hall back to their classrooms, walked by my office window and made me cry. They have been such a blessing to us; and we have been a blessing to them. Our RMI friends know they are included; they know they are loved and welcomed at Rec.

We are all called to love one another. Not just our regular friends. But like Peter, we should love those who we have been taught were unacceptable.

Jesus, in his life experience, didn't have the opportunity to reach out to Muslims or Buddhists. And he had very little contact with Gentiles. But he taught his disciples and set the example of loving **all our neighbors**. And Jesus' disciples and true followers, like Peter, helped stretch us even further.

And we too, as followers of Jesus, are called to "Love one another," especially those who are being excluded. We are called to continue to stretch the Church to love all our neighbors, near and far.

Even the ones we grew up thinking were demon possessed.

Amen