

5 Easter C 2010

Acts 11:1-18
Psalm 148
Revelation 21:1-6
John 13:31-35

If you want to look at racial profiling
Or ethnic stereotypes
Or vilification of those who see themselves as favoring inclusion
By those who believe they uphold tradition,
And scorn of those who uphold tradition
By those who favor inclusion –
If you want to see all this at work,
There's no need to look around you right now,
When you could go back to the first century.
Arizona has nothing over the early church.

No issue was contested more bitterly
Among the first followers of the way
Than this question:
Could Gentiles,
The rabble from anywhere
Who had never received the revelation of God
Made known in the law,
Who practiced all sorts of appalling customs,
Including eating pigs and exercising at the gymnasium,
And, perhaps worst of all,
Not circumcising their male children,
Could these people possibly,
Under any circumstances,
Be intended by God
To enter the kingdom of God
And inherit the promise of life?

For centuries the children of Israel
Had struggled with the prophetic call,
To be a light to the nations.
What would it mean,
To fling wide the gates

And welcome the nations into Zion?
Under imperial rule,
Their teachers and leaders discerned
that the time when nations would stream to the light was not yet,
And they deliberately refrained from inviting anyone
To enter the household of Israel.
But then a wandering rabbi
Began to preach to the lost sheep
Of the house of Israel,
To welcome sinners and eat with them,
And to announce the arrival of the kingdom of God.

When, after his execution by the empire,
With, admittedly,
The collaboration of the religious authorities,
When his friends found that he was not dead
But radiantly alive
And promising life to all,
Then they faced one of life's big questions –

Does all mean all, or some?

Could anyone follow Jesus
On the way that leads to life?
Could anyone step up and say,
I am thirsty,
Please let me drink from the spring you have found,
A spring
Welling up from the water of life?
Could anyone say,
I want to join your community,
Because you seem to have
What I've been looking for?

What happened when people saw the followers of Jesus
Gathered in his name,
And asked
If they could come in?

Late or soon,
Every community has to answer this question –
Who can come among us?

What kind of community
Would the followers of the way become?
What would the requirements for entry be?
Was anyone in without even trying?
Was anyone out without hope of ever getting in?
What would the rules be?
What principles could they apply?

Jesus doesn't seem to be much interested
In communities organized around principles
That define who's in and who's out.
Every time he met an "in group,"
He went and found the outsiders
And invited them to come in.
But he didn't make a new "in group;"
He was interested in something else,
Something other than forming
A new community based on who's in and who's out.

Jesus talks about a community based on love.

Jesus told his friends that there was only one sure way
The world would know that they were a community
Gathered in his name,
Formed by his teaching,
nourished by the food he gave,
their thirst quenched by springs from the water of life.

The world would know they were his disciples,
His friends,
Because they loved each other.

Easy to say.

As you know, hard to do.
Hard to be a community of love
That looks beyond political differences
And theological stances
And liturgical preferences
And personal foibles
And pure and simple likes and dislikes.

We have always struggled with it,
Since the early days of the church.
In fact, we find it such a struggle
That we try to tell ourselves
That Christian community is really formed
Around different principles.
Principles like this:
How should we act?
What should we think?
How should we pray?
What should we do?

But Jesus keeps telling us,
It's all about love.

So what do we do,
At a time like this,
When a justice issue demands our attention?

What do we do as we try,
Individually and in community,
To find a stance, a perspective,
And perhaps a voice
That takes into account
All the known and unknown things
That go into making an ethical decision
Or taking a political position?

What is my own history?

What do the people around me think?
What does the Bible say?
What has the church said in the past?

What would Jesus do?

Immigration is a complex issue.
There is more involved
Than calling each other fascists and communists
Or saying the other side is cruel or naïve.
Arguments can be made on more than two sides,
And the arguments on more than one side
Can be carefully reasoned
And take into account the needs of children and families
As well as those of business or ideology.

As individuals, we will take different positions.

But we are here because we gather in the name of Jesus.
And Jesus did not call us to be a community
Defined by our positions on immigration reform,
But a community that is based in love.
Only love,
The sacrificial, self giving love
That is the essence of the one who calls us
And gives us life.

I know the leanings of my own heart
On this issue.
I know that if I ask myself the question,
What would Jesus do,
I like to think Jesus would agree with me.

I do believe
There's a right and wrong way
To approach the issue of immigration,
And the host of issues
That center on the question of inclusion.

But I also know that finding and following Jesus
Can shatter all our assumptions,
Even those we think come from him.

Peter, after all,
Thought he was doing the right thing
When he refused to eat those unclean animals
That floated down from heaven on a sheet.

It was a revelation to him
That everything he had once believed
And held onto for dear life
Had become irrelevant,
That his world was organized
Around a whole different question.

It turned out, that time,
That everyone was welcome.
All meant all.

It was hard for him,
I suspect,
To let go of everything he had held on to.
It was hard for all the disciples, I suspect,
To let themselves be shaped into a community of love.

Not a community of inclusion or exclusion,
Not a community of right and wrong,
Not a community that held onto tradition or embraced the new,
But a community of love.

So what about us?
When I hear the good news
In today's gospel,
I wonder,
if we asked Jesus how we should act,
Jesus might invite us to take another look,

And ask ourselves,
As the first and ultimate question,
Whether everyone knows us
By the love we show one another.
If they do,
Then we can go forward without fear,
And wrestle with the difficult issue of inclusion,
As the apostles did,
And find,
To our surprise,
That we are stretched in ways we never expected,
And taken to places we never would have gone.

But anywhere we go,
If we go in love,
We will find that we are still ourselves,
And still at home.

If we are a community formed around nothing but love,
And love cannot die,
Then we will have the life
That Jesus promised.
By this,
We know we are his disciples,
And his friends.