

GOD'S VISION FOR THE BODY OF CHRIST
ACTS 11: 1-18; JOHN 13: 31-35
FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
MAY 2, 2010

John 13: 31-35

31 When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. 32 If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. 33 Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, „Where I am going, you cannot come. 34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

At the Last Supper Jesus gave the disciples a new commandment to love one another. After his death and resurrection Jesus gave the disciples a mission to share the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ. "Go and make disciples," Jesus told them. The early Christians struggled to do what Jesus asked. What did it mean in real life to love others, to share the Good News and make disciples?

Were they supposed to share the Good News only with other Jews, people like them, or were Gentiles to be included? It was one thing to love others, but should everyone be invited into the church?

What about obeying the law in the scriptures? In the Old Testament, there were specifications about what to eat. Some foods were said to be unclean. There were religious practices people were supposed to follow, including circumcision. Gentiles were not circumcised.

Jesus ushered in change, but how much change? Jesus ate with sinners and reached out to people who were rejected as unclean. Yet Jesus said he came to fulfill the law. The early Christians struggled to be faithful. There was God's Word. There was the ministry of Jesus, and there was the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost was a powerful experience. The Spirit came upon the disciples like tongues of fire. The Spirit came from God. Jesus said the Spirit would teach them everything.

When there was disagreement in the early church, leaders gathered to talk, sometimes before what was called the Jerusalem Council, which probably included disciples, apostles and elders, people like you and like me. Peter came before believers in Jerusalem to explain a change in his own thinking and practice. After a spiritual experience in Joppa, Peter believed that the Holy Spirit comes to Gentiles, as well as to Jews. Listen to God's Word from Acts 11 about Peter's testimony in Jerusalem.

Acts 11: 1-18

11 Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, 3 saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" 4 Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, 5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. 6 As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. 7 I also heard a voice saying to me, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat". 8 But I replied, "By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth." 9 But a second time the voice answered from heaven, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." 10 This happened three

times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. 11 At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. 12 The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. 13 He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, "Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; 14 he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved." 15 And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. 16 And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." 17 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? 18 When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

Thanks be to God for the reading of this Word. Please pray with me. God of all creation, we give you thanks for your call in Jesus Christ. We give thanks for the faithful disciples who dared believe in the Holy Spirit and reach out to those they regarded as unclean. Lord, open our minds to comprehend the work of the Spirit today. Help us keep the new commandment to love others as the body of Christ. Give us the courage to live into the vision you give us. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

I am thankful for the disciples of the early church. Before I served as pastor of a new church development, I did not understand how challenging it is to form a body of Christ – or more appropriately to be formed as a body of Christ. It is a miracle. It is the work of the Lord. We all have the opportunity to contribute our gifts and our faithfulness, and we are blessed by that, but becoming Christ's body is a holy act, God's act.

Last week a pastor of a church in Austin asked me for tips on how to grow a church. Ironically, her request came shortly after I was elected to serve on a commission to visit a new church that is in the midst of conflict. How do we grow a church for Jesus Christ? We love others in Christ's name. Why do churches get embroiled in conflict? They do not love others in Christ's name.

This may sound simple, but it is not. Loving others in Christ's name as we are led by the Spirit is hard work. Most people prefer to associate with people like them, people who agree with them. We develop routines and traditions. We prefer things to remain the same, including the church. The Spirit blows change. The Spirit blows love. The Spirit blows diversity. If we let ourselves be the body of Christ in the world, we are not in control and we will change.

I appreciate the faithfulness of Peter and the circumcised believers who listened to him. We can learn from them. Peter was serving Christ in Joppa when he had a vision. Peter knew the scriptures. He was a faithful Jew. Peter ventured out for Christ. Maybe he was hungry. Perhaps that is why he dreamed of food, but God used the dream to bring change in the body of Christ. Peter received a vision from God. The vision was ostensibly about food, but it was really about people. Then came a knock at the door.

Disciples then and now learn from the Word and from visions and interpretations that God gives us through the Holy Spirit. We learn from our experience in serving Christ, one faithful task after another. We learn by listening to other believers.

Peter said yes to the invitation to visit a Gentile and his family. Sometimes we are asked to cross comfortable boundaries in order to serve God. If we follow the Spirit's lead, we may experience something new and glorious – but first we must dream and venture out. This is true for individuals and for the church.

The boundaries may be social or physical. This week one high school student in Connecticut has the date of his dreams for his prom because he dared ask her with a song and video he submitted on U-tube (ABC Good Morning America, April 28, 2010). She is flying from Tennessee. He has yet to meet her in person. We may not create a U-tube sensation for Christ, but the Spirit is likely to push us out of our comfort zone. If we are the body of Christ, we will love others in Christ's name.

Our Mission Presbytery Executive Hilary Shuford and her husband will visit us for worship on May 16. Hilary said no one greeted her husband at a church they visited recently in Austin. I am sure that will not happen here. At San Gabriel welcoming people is part of our mission to share God's love.

We realized as we grew, there would be a tendency for people to talk to someone they knew instead of visiting with strangers. This is what happened in one large church in Atlanta (Craddock, Craddock Stories, 45). Disciples of Christ Minister Fred Craddock preached four nights in a row at the church. Each evening there was a moment in the service when the pastor said, "We'll now have a time for fellowship. Greet each other in Christian love." Craddock said you never saw such hugging and kissing and carrying-on in your life – people going across the room, and up and down the aisles. Sounds like our passing of the peace at San Gabriel. One night someone came to the pulpit and gave Craddock a big smack on the cheek. He was amazed. Finally the pastor would say, "All right. Hold it, hold it. We have to get on with worship." Craddock said the same thing happened all four nights.

After the last worship service the pastor and his wife took the Craddocks out to coffee. The pastor said, "Did you ever see such a family church? Did you ever see such love in your life in a church?" Craddock's wife replied, "Well, yes, I have." The pastor asked what she meant. "I was there for all four services," she said, "and nobody ever spoke to me." The pastor paused and then explained, "Well, that was because they didn't know who you were."

My friends, Jesus knows who we are. Presbyterians believe that God calls us into worship. We have been invited here to worship God and to love one other. It will require crossing boundaries, but that is what it means to be the body of Christ.

I appreciate Peter's faithfulness in ministering to Cornelius. Cornelius and his family were Gentiles. Who are the Gentiles in our lives? Are there kids at school, people in our neighborhoods, or people in this community that we consider unapproachable or not the kind of people we should invite to church? Methodist Bishop Will Willimon was so impressed with the obvious diversity in one congregation that he asked the pastor how they did it (Pulpit Resource, May 2, 2010, 26). "God only knows," the pastor told him. It just happened. It is a miracle." When we follow the Holy Spirit, God will grow the body of Christ in ways that will surprise us – that is if we go where the Spirit leads.

One church grew by loving their neighbors with donuts (Pulpit Resource, May 9, 2004, 30). They put four donuts and a prayer in plastic bags and then delivered them to people in the neighborhoods around the church. A few weeks into their project, an older man showed up in worship. When the pastor asked for prayer concerns, the man stood up and said, "I guess I haven't been in church in over 30 years, maybe longer. I've been having a tough time lately. I barely get by on Social Security, and last week I spent all my money on medicine. I had nothing left for food until the next paycheck. Then some of you people knocked on my door and handed me a sack of donuts. Those donuts were as much love and concern as I have seen in a long, long time. I'm here to say thank you. I'd like to be part of a group of people like you, if this is the sort of thing you do for other people."

God forms and reforms the body of Christ with each person, each gift and each act of love and faithfulness. The glue of grace holds us together, but first we must answer God's call and commit. We commit to loving Christ, and we commit to loving each other.

According to our gospel passage, people will know we are Christ's disciples by our love. The Spirit moves us to love others in ways that surprise us. At San Gabriel our mission statement says we share God's love with each other, our community and the world. Love is the measure of faithfulness, not our building, our music, my sermons or our programs.

Enron had a mission statement which read, "Respect, integrity, communication and excellence" (Homiletics, May 2, 2010, 15). I pray that we fulfill our mission better than they fulfilled theirs. In Jesus Christ and led by the Spirit, generations work together to share God's love and the Word with each other, our community and the world. How are we doing? On our website you will find the vision we believe God gave us for 2015, but we know that God is always doing something new. As we come to the Table this morning, may we open our hearts and minds to see God's vision for this body of Christ. Then let us leave this place ready to carry God's love into the world and gather all people to Christ.