

A New Door Opened

Fifth Sunday of Easter
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Sunday, May 2, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Acts 11:1-18

There was a time in the history of the church when girls were not allowed to be acolytes; when women couldn't be greeters, or ushers, or serve on Church Council, or vote at congregational meetings, and, just until 40 short years ago in our historic branch of Lutheranism, could not be ordained. There was a time in the history of the church when lay people couldn't give out the elements of communion; when men and women sat on opposite sides of the nave. There was a time in the history of the church when divorced individuals were excluded from the Sacrament of the Altar; when baptisms were done privately on Saturdays or Sunday afternoons with just the pastor and the family; when communion was celebrated four times a year whether you needed it or not; and you didn't take your first communion until you had sat through that cruelty we inflict on young people called confirmation or Affirmation of Baptism. There was a time in the history of the church when sermons were 45 minutes to two hours in length; when only organs were the accepted instruments for making music unto the Lord; and when you only dared date, much less marry, one of your own kind – meaning a Lutheran, of course. There was a time in the history of the church when you couldn't get a pastor to do a funeral unless the deceased was a member; when only those who professed a certain way would be welcome at your communion table.

In all these cases the fresh breeze of God's Spirit blew through the church and new things were tried and accepted. And in each case, the Gospel and its expression took on new opportunities and new dimensions as the church throughout history has sought to be responsive to the guidance and prodding of the Holy Spirit. Thank God we have moved away from thinking that the church is some kind of exclusive club where membership and participation is determined by sex or age, or any number of exclusionary principles.

There is the story of the fellow who dies and goes to heaven and joins a group of recent arrivees on a tour given by St. Peter himself. They move through this enormous castle filled with rooms, just like the Gospel of John envisions it. At each room, St. Peter stops and informs the newly arrived of those behind each door. At one door there is the sound of bingo numbers being called out. "Those are the Catholics," announces St. Peter. At the next door there is the sound of loud prayers and praise. "Those are the Pentecostals," he explains. At the next door there is the sound of joyous singing. "The Baptists love to sing," announced Peter. As they approached the next door, St. Peter asked the group to be very quiet as they tiptoed past. Once they were beyond the door, someone asked him why they had to be quiet as they went past that particular door. "Oh," replied St. Peter, "they're the Lutherans and they think they're the only ones up here."

It is better to tell a story like that on oneself than to indict others with it, but if truth be told, there is a little bit of that sentiment in all denominations. The church has always had to deal with this issue of who's in and who's out.

Our first lesson for today records one of the moments of change, of transition, in the early church as it tried to define who's in and who's out. The book of Acts is the story of the early Christian Church as it struggled to learn what it meant to be the church. If you've noticed, I have chosen to preach on these texts from Acts over the last several weeks, because a church, any church, in transition, like you are between called Senior Pastor's, should hear and reflect on it ecclesiology. The church is an ever-changing and evolving Body, thanks to the work of the Spirit, and has been since it was called into existence all those centuries ago.

The church, as we recall, had its beginning in Jerusalem after the Resurrection of our Lord, and our text for today tells us that in the circle of disciples in Jerusalem there was a group known as the "circumcision party." Verse two of Acts 11 reads: "So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him." Now here's the issue. Because the Gospel of Jesus was first carried to the Jews (they were the first to believe), there was a strong feeling among them (these circumcised believers) that every male who came into the Christian faith had to be circumcised first, as all Jewish males were circumcised. Circumcision was the mark of entrance into the biblical covenant with God – a mark carefully preserved all during Israel's exile and dispersion – and the church formed the continuance of that covenant. Anyone who was not circumcised was therefore not a member of the covenant and could not be a member of the church. And that meant that all non-Jews, namely Gentiles, were considered unclean, profane and unholy. The earliest church, right after the resurrection, defined itself by those who were in, those Jewish Christians who believed in Jesus, and those who were out, namely the Gentiles and the non-believing Jews.

Peter has a vision, recorded in Acts 10, that opens the door for the church to do a whole new thing. Our text for today from the next chapter of Acts is Peter telling what happened to those in Jerusalem who criticized him for associating with the Gentiles in Caesarea. And it is because he has shared table fellowship and preached to and baptized such supposedly unclean Gentiles that the circumcision party criticizes him. Peter hasn't followed the rules! He has gone outside of the acceptable circle of believers to include the uncircumcised and therefore unholy persons in the faith!

But Peter's reply in verse 17 is very telling: "If God gave the same gifts to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ" – he's referring to the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost – "who was I that I could hinder God?" Peter, you see, refuses to curse those whom God has blessed. He will not set his own judgment and his own criteria of faith above those of God. God has called on Peter in his vision to do a new thing and to begin to spread this Gospel to the ends of the earth, and God has taken away one of the hindrances to that mission. Now to be part of the church has nothing to do with upholding outdated laws and rituals, and everything to do with proclaiming the Lordship of Jesus. The Holy Spirit opened the door and now the whole world would hear of the Gospel, the Good News that Jesus died and rose from the dead for all people, for all races, for everyone.

Perhaps that struggle of the New Testament church back in the first century has something to teach us. There are a lot of people who are quick to make judgments about who's in and who's out as far as God is concerned. A poll was taken one time in which a majority of those surveyed were quite sure that they personally were going to go to heaven, but sadly weren't sure that their neighbors were going to join them. The

church's litmus test for faith has changed over the years, but one thing is quite certain, people have always been quick to draw a line in the sand and to make the claim that those who are on their side of the line are "in," and those over there are "out."

In our Gospel text today a new commandment is given. Jesus enjoins his followers "to love one another" as he loved us. And we know that Jesus was criticized and finally crucified for accepting into his love the unacceptable – the ragged poor, the sinners, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the foreigners, the hated Samaritans, the Gentiles and now us.

There is the true story of the congregation in Rome during the third century, which truly practiced the ministry of care for those in need. Saint Lawrence was chief of this group of caregivers. When the pagan Prefect of Rome heard rumors that the church was receiving generous offerings, and he thought the government was being cheated out of its share, he ordered Lawrence to produce what he called the "treasures of the church." Lawrence promised to have them assembled together in three days, at which time he showed them to the official.

Instead of seeing great wealth gathered, all the Roman official was shown were the poor, the sick, the widows, and the orphans who were supported by the ministry and offerings of the congregation. These were, according to Lawrence, the "treasures of the church." The Roman prefect was so enraged that he ordered Lawrence's execution as a punishment for his embarrassment.

We are all the treasurers of God, folks, and he calls us to open our doors and let in the little, the last, the least and the lost – so all may know of God's love for them in Christ.

A new door opened in that first century church, as God's Spirit moved through the apostles and opened them to new possibilities of service. I pray that the Holy Spirit will continue to blow, knocking open all the doors we close and allowing God's love to move us in new and exciting ways. The commandment Jesus gave his disciples was not about judging, about who's in and who's out, nor about excluding others, but about loving one another. You see Jesus' love encompassed all, and so should ours. AMEN.

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