

***“Both/And: Sacred and Desecrated Places  
Within and Around Us”***

John 13:31-25; Acts 11:1-18

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Message for May 15, 2022

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Today’s texts remind us of the importance of loving and reaching out to others, whomever they may be. Central to this message is that everyone and everything is sacred – it is us, in our pain, our brokenness, our human failings and frailties – that disrupt what is holy. In the Bible Wisdom teachings this morning we hear about rules: John tells us that Jesus shares a new commandment. And in the Book of Acts, Peter, who has come into his own and is ministering to others, shares a vision that reveals to him that the long list of dos and don’ts no longer applies.

Those Peter had been ministering to, and the leaders of their community, approached Peter because he was hanging out with the wrong people, eating forbidden foods, and breaking all the rules. When they confronted him, he told them not only of a vision that came to him, but he also heard the voice of God, urging him to eat what God had made clean. Peter argued with the voice: “...nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.” The voice replied, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” When the Holy Spirit fell upon the people that Peter visited, he came to understand that God was moving among all the people – not just his community. Peter realized that God wanted the message of God’s love and grace to be shared with everyone.

And Jesus said the same thing, essentially. In John’s Gospel, Jesus was reminding his disciples that they needed to love one another. He told them that they would not be recognized by their words but by their actions. The “new” commandment wasn’t so new at all, but something that must be remembered afresh.

In these past weeks since Easter, the risen Christ has made several appearances. Today, we shift back to the evening of the last supper and Jesus has just washed the disciples’ feet. This reading from John is sandwiched between Judas’ betrayal and Peter’s denial. We heard the passage begin: “When he had gone out...” referring to Judas who left Jesus and the company of the disciples, as he headed off to turn Jesus in. In the

verses just after Jesus tells the disciples of the new commandment, he foretells Peter's denial.

Jesus knows that Peter, one of his closest companions, will deny him. But his parting words to his disciples don't focus on blame for their past and future failures, but rather on preparing them for what is to come, promising that although he will no longer be physically present with them, they will not be abandoned.

This "new commandment" — "that you love one another as I have loved you" — is in parallel with what Jesus has already told his disciples: "You call me Teacher and Lord — and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (13:13-15).

The "new commandment" is also paralleled in John 15:12-14: "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. You are my friends if you do what I command you."

These two parallels to John 13:34 help to flesh out the meaning of "loving one another." On the one hand, loving one another as Jesus has loved encompasses the mundane; it means serving one another, even in the most menial tasks. On the other hand, this love encompasses heroic acts of great risk; it extends even to the point of giving one's life for another.

This provides us a fuller picture - the breadth and depth of the love that Jesus is calling us into - an inclusive and nonjudgmental love.

Pairing this Gospel lesson with this passage from Acts is powerful, as we are introduced again to Peter, who is in a much different state of mind and heart. We witness to the ways he continues to move along his own spiritual journey after having denied Jesus. He was forgiven, and we must imagine, that he has also forgiven himself.

Listening to the people confront Peter with their questions, we gain a new understanding of how entrenched we tend to get regarding rules and regulations. The law includes a long list of rules – rules that we can so often get caught up in. We become blind to the bigger picture. We lose

perspective and forget that God's love is what is most important. When you think about it, when we act in love, many times the rules naturally follow!

Since meeting with Zooming Kids this past Tuesday night, I've been reflecting on the activity that Sara designed for them as we explored the reading from Acts. We each had a bowl of water, a handful of coins, and a piece of tinfoil. We folded up the foil to make a boat-like container and placed it on the water where it floated merrily along. We explained that the coins represented all the rules, all the "don'ts" that they hear all the time: Don't lie, Don't hit others, Don't say hurtful things to others, Don't eat with your mouth open... Then we began to place coins inside our foil boats, watching to see how many coins it would take before the vessel took on water. Pretty soon our foil contraptions were sunk, lying at the bottom of our bowls. Then we dumped out the water and set the coins to the side, placing one coin inside. No worries. Our boats were floating merrily once again. One coin, one rule: love one another.

It illustrated so powerfully for me that we weigh ourselves down with so many "don'ts" – what if instead we focused on a foundation of loving presence - doing for one another and being there for each other? What if we recognized the sacred within us, around us, between us – rather than desecrating it with misunderstandings, rules, condemnation, and vitriol? May we accept this invitation to a "new" thing: to love one another as the Divine loves us.

Amen.