

As God Has Loved Us

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Most things of greatness and beauty start with a vision. It's not accidental that the first thing God creates is light, which we use for vision. Vision comes in two forms, external and internal. We think of Genesis 1:3 as referring only to the external variety of vision, but it may also refer to the internal form of vision, as well – the vision that God has for creation – a plan, a dream, a hope. All of that starts with a vision of what might be.

And all of our lessons this morning are about how people respond to the vision of God's love. Our lessons show how responding to God's love takes us in concentric circles of love, from how we think we should love God as individuals, to loving others for their own sake and not for ours, which is how Jesus told his disciples to love in our gospel reading, and finally, in that largest circle, to responding in praise to the love God has shown us in creation. When you catch sight of the vision of the vastness of God's love, from its tiniest to its biggest manifestations, and when you begin to create the next moment of your life on the basis of that vision – and the moment after that and the moment after that, until you have lived years or decades of your life on the basis of that vision – you begin to realize that the angel was speaking truly when he said that Peter had a message by which we can be saved.

So let's start there, in that innermost ring of God's love, with an individual trying to be faithful to the God and faith he loves.

Peter has had a vision that causes him to re-consider some of his most cherished religious beliefs. By the time we reach our lesson in Acts, Peter has had a major religious re-set. Peter's a good Jewish boy who keeps kosher, and because he keeps kosher, certain foods are prohibited to him, and he cannot eat with people who eat prohibited foods because the food that they would serve him, even if he's allowed to eat it, has been prepared in cooking vessels that have been contaminated by cooking prohibited foods.

So not only can Peter not eat the foods, he also can't eat with the folks who eat such foods.

But Peter has been asked to preach the word of God to a Gentile named Cornelius, and Peter knows that the word of God is far more important than the dietary laws that are only a small part of that revelation. Cornelius is described as a devout, charitable, God-fearing man, so Peter knows that the word of God has already planted itself in Cornelius' heart, even if he doesn't follow every rule.

But Peter and Cornelius are from different sides of the tracks, so to speak. Cornelius is a Roman centurion, part of that group tasked with enforcing Roman occupation of the Jewish homeland, and Peter, being a good Jewish boy, should not be hanging out with one of the oppressors.

So when both Cornelius and Peter have visions leading them to each other, you can bet there would be plenty of people objecting from both sides. This is like a Hatfield marrying a McCoy. It happened in that famous feud, but lots of people grumbled about it.

And that's where the reading in Acts picks up this morning. The apostles and believers back in the motherland, Judea, have heard that Peter has violated Jewish law, and they summon him to a hearing and they demand an explanation. And the explanation that Peter gives them is that the Holy Spirit told these men that Peter had a message that leads to salvation, and when Peter began to deliver

that message, the Holy Spirit allowed them to speak in languages that they didn't normally speak. Peter took this ecstatic experience as confirmation of what Jesus had said to his apostles earlier about the activity of the Holy Spirit, and so Peter ordered that these Gentiles – the first non-Jews to accept Christian teaching – be baptized.

This is a big change for the first generation of Christians, who were all Jews. They knew it at the time, but none of them could know how big a change it would turn out to be. The council at Jerusalem knew that allowing Gentiles into a Jewish movement would change it, but they couldn't have known that it would turn that movement into an entirely new religion called Christianity. But when Peter reported that the Holy Spirit had touched those Gentiles' lives with the truth of God's love, who was he – who were they – to withhold a welcome into the household of faith?

So welcome them they did, but the differences between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians eventually turned out to be insurmountable for the two groups to remain within one religion, and so, within a few decades after Peter's meeting with the Jerusalem Council, Christianity and Judaism would go their separate ways. And much of it began with a vision of what God called Peter to accept. That's how big a deal Peter's vision was.

And he had that vision because he had a message with the power to save – not just Jewish people, but all people. That's what the first followers of Jesus believed they possessed – a message with the power to save. That is a message of God's love.

When we say together our UCC Statement of Faith, we say of God, "You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin." That's what holy love looks like -- offering people a way out of aimlessness and sin. Not damning them to hell if they don't follow our religion -- which is what a lot of Christians do and have done over the centuries -- but offering people an example which is also an invitation. We're inviting them to live a life of believing that when all is said and done, love remains the way out of aimlessness and sin.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind," and "You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself" (Matt. 22:37-38) – that's the message of salvation, and that message is not complicated. It's not hard to grasp. It does take effort, and it won't ever be very popular because we humans are so self-absorbed. We don't love others as God has loved us because the focus of our actions is almost always on ourselves – not on God and not on our neighbors.

Look at what we're living with right now in this miserable period of global nativism. Nativism is a political ideology that says that nations are for the so-called "natives" and not the so-called "immigrants." We're seeing it everywhere: here in the United States, in Great Britain, in France, in the Netherlands, in the Philippines, in Poland, in Myanmar – virtually nowhere in the world has been untouched by the lie of nativism. And the reason it's a lie is because there is no such thing as natives; we're all immigrants. Human beings have been migrating across artificial boundaries for thousands of years, and all of us who consider ourselves natives are the descendants of people who migrated from somewhere else.

But that doesn't stop some of us from treating others of us very badly, and we've been doing it for a very long time.

As some of you know, I used to give tours of Boston for incoming Harvard students, and when I would lead those young people to Boston's North End, I would always point out what is called the Old North Church and talk about Paul Revere and his famous ride, and so forth, but I would also point in the direction of Charlestown and tell the students about the Ursuline convent riots of 1834, when a mob of Protestants burned a convent and school to the ground in a wave of anti-Catholic bigotry – a wave energized in part by the preaching of Lyman Beecher, a staunch anti-Catholic Congregationalist minister

and father of Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe. As waves of immigrants arrived in Boston harbor across the decades and settled in the city's North End – first the English, then the Germans, then the Irish, then the Russians, then the Poles, then the Italians, then the Portuguese -- they were met repeatedly with resistance, prejudice, discrimination, and violence. That deeply ingrained human impulse to feel threatened by the other reared its ugly head time and again, and all of the so-called Christian people of Boston refused to love their neighbors as they loved themselves and as God had already loved them. Christians so easily slip into the mindset of non-believers, who confuse blessings with rights, and we believe that we have earned the blessings which allow us to live securely and comfortably.

That's the great myth of merit: it attributes everything to human effort. The myth of merit completely ignores the fact that the vast majority of us are born into whatever comfort and security we will enjoy for the rest of our lives – or not.

A child born into sub-Saharan poverty did absolutely nothing to merit that, and when that child's parents make incredible sacrifices to try to help that child out of poverty, and when we make every effort to undermine those sacrifices through policies and laws, we make a mockery of our Christian faith. We are not loving our neighbors as we love ourselves – and yes, immigrants are our neighbors, just like everyone else – and we are certainly not loving God as God has loved us.

And when someone steps out of that lock-step and welcomes people as God has already welcomed them, they're considered disloyal or worse, and that's why Peter has been called on the carpet by his fellow believers. He's breaking the rules and showing that God does not share our partiality for our own. God is not threatened by the other. God does not love because the other looks like God or speaks the same language as God or dresses like God or eats the same food as God. God loves indiscriminately, which is how Jesus loved, and how he told us to love in the reading from John.

The circle of God's love expands when we see Jesus instructing the apostles he's about to send out to all the corners of the globe with his message of indiscriminate love. One of the striking differences between Judaism and Christianity is that Christianity was, from its very beginnings, a message reaching out to others. We Christians haven't always done that well, but evangelism is part of our DNA. We have received a great gift – the incarnation of the Word of God as our brother – and we want to share that gift with the world.

Jesus got himself into trouble repeatedly because he loved indiscriminately. He loved as God loves, who causes the sun to rise on the evil as well as the good, and the rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous alike. We are to resist becoming our enemies, but we are nonetheless to love our enemies, because only by loving our enemies do we show who our true parent is.

But that's not the way we live. We love our friends and hate our enemies, and we harm or threaten to harm our enemies constantly: Iran, North Korea, Russia, Isis, Islamic State, the Taliban – you name it. Sadly, we've now begun to identify our fellow citizens as enemies, with our own president referring to this country's free press, one of democracy's greatest achievements, as the enemy of the American people.

We may be living as good Americans, but we're living as very bad Christians. We inflict harm or threaten to inflict harm constantly – on others and on God's creation, calling it business-as-usual or collateral damage or, worst of all, patriotism – and we reserve the bulk of our love for the circles that immediately surround us and love us back. We are digging ourselves deeper and deeper into our silos of self-interest and self-protection and self-advancement. That's selfish and its endemic and it won't end until God brings in that new heaven and new earth that Linda read to us about in the book of Revelation.

Revelation shows us, along with the Psalm with which we opened the service, what it looks like

to love as God has loved us: expansively, courageously, gracefully, and joyfully. Both the book of Revelation and the book of Psalms are filled with praise, because praise is what happens when you love as God has loved us. Praise is the response we make for the gift of God's love, which is first made manifest in our creation – “our” meaning everything, not just people. And that's why the Psalmist calls on fire and hail and fruit trees and cedars to praise God – they exist, which is the first sign that God loves them and the first reason for their praise.

When we love as God has loved us, we begin to see our connectedness not just to other people, but to everything, because God loves it all. Otherwise, it wouldn't be here. And when you lift your eyes to the hills, as the psalmist calls us to do, and when you lift up your hearts to God, as I ask you to do at the start of every Communion service, you begin to realize that all of those planets and stars and clouds of gases that make up just our little Milky Way galaxy – one among perhaps a hundred billion galaxies, and that's just in the part of the universe that we can see – when you lift your eyes and hearts to that reality, you begin, just begin, to have sense of how vast and deep God's love really is, and what an opportunity is waiting for us, if we will love as God has loved us.

Jesus-the-Word-of-God-made-flesh – put hyphens between all of those words and you'll begin to get a sense of who Jesus really is – Jesus-the-Word-of-God-made-flesh gave us a new commandment to love one another as Jesus-the-Word-of-God-made-flesh has loved us. That is love on the cosmic scale, and fulfilling that commandment opens us up to possibilities we can't even begin to imagine. It's a great way to live.