

St. James', Mt. Airy
4/24/16

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

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

From time to time I have heard people say that if Jesus came back today he wouldn't recognize the religion which bears his name.

When people say that the implication is that there is something wrong with Christianity and the church. Depending on **who** says it, the list of what's wrong changes.

Those on the Right will talk about the definition of marriage and human sexuality. Those on the Left will bring up Jesus' ministry of bringing those on the margins to the center, and his care for the poor.

When people say that Jesus wouldn't recognize the religion that bears his name today – they are correct, but they miss the mark.

Nothing that is alive with the breath of the Spirit will be unchanged after 2000 years, the conversion of millions, and being planted in countless different cultures.

In fact, as we see in Acts today, the movement of people called The Way that began in the wake of Jesus' death was already changing within the lifetime of those who were closest to him.

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Today we hear the second of three tellings of Peter's experience of bringing the Word of God to the Gentiles. Called a Lukan triad, the repetition cues us theological importance. Changes made within each successive narration adds layers of meaning to that particular episode, clarifying its theological importance.¹

In today's reading Peter is compelled to give testimony to the council of church leaders in Jerusalem, some of whom are upset to hear that uncircumcised Gentiles had accepted the word of God.

Instead of giving a logical argument, or defending his actions passionately, as we might expect Peter to do, Peter's response to their questions was to tell a story. And his story changes their hearts. The text says, "they were silenced" by Peter's story, but really, only their criticisms were silenced, because our Gospel ends with them praising God.

Stories, not arguments, change lives. We are told this story again so that we know exactly what it was that changed the minds and hearts of the Jerusalem leaders.

Generally, arguments tend to crystallize differences – but stories invite everyone into an experience, inviting people across chasms that separate.² Jesus knew this, it's why he told so many parables, and why those parables still change lives today.

¹ Robert W. Wall, Exegetical Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2*.

² Robert W. Wall, Exegetical Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2*.

The story Peter told was fantastical – with visions of beasts, conversations with a heavenly voice, and the Spirit pushing Peter to go to Caesarea.

And then this happened: *And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as it had upon us at the beginning. 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.’ 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?*

Who was I that I could hinder God?

Such a powerful statement – and a reminder. When we pay attention to the Spirit, when we follow the commandment to love one another as Jesus loved us, and new people are drawn to the love of God and the community of believers, things will change – and who are we to hinder it?

One of the important lessons from this story is that while conversion changes the convert, another consequence is that the convert also brings new perspective to the message. As we hear in the Revelation, God is always making all things new. Bringing people of a new culture, or time, into the faith community calls for restatement of the gospel in terms that speak to that new culture, and so it has been through church history.³

In today’s passage from Acts we see one of the first iterations of it, and it continues on from there. Such restatements continued as the Christian faith became integrated into the Roman Empire of the west, and the Byzantine civilization of the east; it continued in relation to Aristotelian thought in the Middle Ages, and again as the

³ Lewis S. Mudge, Theological Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2*.

Reformation marked the indigenization of faith into Northern Europe. That Reformation has continued throughout America since its founding, enter-twining with the particular values of our nation. We are now witnessing a massive reindigenization of faith taking place across the global South, and it is only in the last 30 years or so that the voices of women in theology have begun to take root.⁴

Just how far can indigenization go before the original faith becomes unrecognizable? Are there some things that are unchangeable? Where is the line?

This is really at the heart of the question when people ask whether or not Jesus would recognize the church today. How does a living faith change over time and place, but still retain its essentials, its center, its authority? And who decides?

That last question is the human question – because it’s not about God, it’s about us – and our sinful human tendency to love power, and wield it over others. That is the long thread of human history.

But there is another thread. That thread is the love of God. A love that abides, and that is unchanging. Also unchanging is our call to love one another, for this is how everyone will know we are disciples of the Christ.

In Peter’s preaching the changeless elements are speaking the name of Jesus, bearing witness to his resurrection, and acknowledging the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.⁵

⁴ Lewis S. Mudge, Theological Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2*.

⁵ Lewis S. Mudge, Theological Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2*.

We may add to this the foundational principle recorded in Acts 11, where notions of clean and unclean as ways of separating people from one another are ruled antithetical to Christian faith forever, invalidating any attempt on our part to reinstate them, in any form, ever again.⁶

I think that part would seem very familiar to Jesus.

What this all means for us today, here at St. James', is that we are part of a long history of people of faith who come together to read scripture and be fed at God's table before being sent into the world. We are called to live God's story seven whole days, not one in seven.

It means that our prayers and hymns change from season to season, and sometimes we'll like them, and sometimes we'll love them, and sometimes we won't – but we recognize that God is present whenever two or three are gathered, and our call to love and serve God and neighbor never changes.

It means that it is not our job to separate ourselves into clean and unclean, into men and women, Republican and Democrat, straight and gay, left handed and right handed, or however else we try to divide ourselves. Who are we to hinder to God? It is our job to love one another as best we can, just as God loves us.

Perhaps that's the most essential unchanging part, because it's the most important part of the story.

⁶ Lewis S. Mudge, *Theological Perspective, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2.*

I think of the great sage Madeleine L'Engle summed all of this up beautifully when she wrote,

“We draw people to Christ not by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.”

Let that be our call, this day, and always.

~ AMEN ~