

Easter 5 C: May 15; 2022

All Saints', Littleton, NH

The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Acts 11: 1-18

Psalm 148

Revelation 21: 1-6

John 13: 31-35

No Respector of Persons/One in Christ

A two minute teaching on reading and praying the Psalms.....Yesterday I was talking with the Saturday Centering Prayer and book study group after we had just finished Morning Prayer and the subject of the Psalms came up. The Psalms are a big part of the daily office and of course we have a Psalm every Sunday. The Psalms have been referred to as the Prayer Book of the Bible and have been a big part of Christian worship for centuries. Sometimes, however, we don't know what to do with them. Psychologically and emotionally they can be all over the map, and at times they seem to have been written by a 14 year old: 'my god is bigger than your god and he's gonna get you', 'woe is me and I am so horribly maligned and attacked', 'why is everyone gossiping about me?', etc., etc.

It is rather hard to 'pray' these psalms, since they seem so immature and self-serving. But there is a way to think about them, especially the difficult ones. In a sense there are 2 levels of meaning we can think about: there is the literal meaning which can be like a mirror to the mind and soul—not that we should emulate them, but we can look at them and remember how we have felt the same at times and the negativity and retribution expressed is something we need to be watchful for and an area that needs God's healing. In a sense, those psalms become confessions of our own failings. The second level of meaning can be one where we think not literally but more as a spiritual allegory, as reflecting the interior struggle in our prayer life. Not all psalms pose this problem of course, as represented by our psalm this morning, where it is just all praise of God, and the wonderful 23rd psalm we had last week—these are much easier to take at face value and pray in earnest. I just wanted to give a brief commentary on this to remind us how to approach the more difficult psalms.

Now, onto this morning's readings and the great lesson of inclusion. In this morning's first reading Peter is going to Jerusalem to explain what had happened to him in Joppa (Acts 10) with some gentiles. He relays his prophetic dream where God shows him all kinds of animals, some of which are not kosher, and tells them to kill and eat them. Peter objects, but God responds, "what God has made clean, you must not call profane."

This dream was followed by being summoned to the home of a Roman Centurian, Cornelius, who was something of a religious supporter of the Jewish community. Cornelius had been visited by an angel of the Lord to summon Peter but going to a gentile's home would have ritually defiled Peter, so there was a risk for Peter in doing this.

[Acts 10] When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. ²⁶ But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man." ²⁷ And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered; ²⁸ and he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another nation; but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me."

When Peter arrived, Cornelius just wanted to hear what Peter could teach them—he was hungry for the revelation of God. Peter began to explain the good news of Jesus, and even before much could happen, the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and his household.

This is the story that Peter relayed to the leadership of the early Jesus movement in Jerusalem. There were some, called 'the circumcision party', that were uncomfortable with changing any of the inherited traditions—thinking that anyone becoming a follower of Jesus, must also conform to all Jewish law; therefore, any man wanting to be accepted into the community must be circumcised if not already. And isn't it interesting that this early in the beginnings of the church there were already 'parties' in the church! If one studies the history of peoples, religions, and politics, this separation into different parties seems to be endemic for human communities.

I suppose if you look at the arc of history, counterbalancing 'parties' has been something of a good thing for finding a way forward; and it is enshrined in our political system—democracies do seem to thrive with a 'loyal opposition'. The nexus of trial and danger of too much political partisanship is evident in our body politic today. We wonder how it all will end and throw up our hands. To be sure, it takes strong leadership that doesn't demonize the other. But it also takes a wise and

peacemaking electorate who can disagree about policy, but still hold one another in a basic regard as fellow citizens. The same can be said for divisions in the church.

Peter's experience is wisdom for the ages about excluding the other. It was strange and unsettling, but Peter and the others finally realized that they needed to spiritually evolve! You would have thought that this would not have been difficult for them after all the interactions that Jesus had with foreigners, tax collectors, prostitutes, and otherwise 'unclean' people, but they still had to struggle through this! But after Peter's story, the disciples in Jerusalem saw 'the light' too and rejoiced in God's grace and favor, even to the gentiles. Paul reflected this in his writings too when in his letter to the Galatians (3:28) he wrote: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

And in the gospel this morning, the call to love just got bigger for Jews. The commandment to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself grew to include neighbors who were not Jews! This morning's powerful moment at the last supper after Jesus has finished washing the disciples feet and he gives the new commandment to "love one another as I have loved you" was even a greater expansion of the call to love. There was nothing new in Jewish spirituality about loving God and loving neighbor, but the qualifier is the key in Jesus' statement-- "as I have loved you"--no longer just 'as you love yourself'!

What do you think that means?? How did/does Christ love us? What was the totally self-giving, sacrificial love of Christ all about. How did he embody it? Scripture gives us some good lessons on this kind of love....

Paul (30-60 CE) [Rom 1:29-10]

9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;
10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

John's Gospel--different than synoptics; after divisiveness in the Johannine community? [John 15:12-17]

12 **"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.**

13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

14 You are my friends if you do what I command you.

...17 **I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.**

[1John 4:7-21] 7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does

not know God, for God is love. 9 God's love was revealed among us in this way God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us... . 11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12 ... if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. ... 16 So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. 19 We love because he first loved us. 20 Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. 21 The commandment we have from him is this those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Throughout our life we are challenged by 'parties', groups and things that pull us apart. And, like the psalmist, we are tempted to retreat to our 14 year old self and get self righteous, self-pitying, and otherwise dramatic; but the way of Jesus calls us to reject those things that cause us to label people as 'other' and deserving of our and God's vindictive punishment. Jesus calls us to 'love others as I have loved you'.