



Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 15, 2022

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Acts 11:1-18](#)

[Psalm 148](#)

[Revelation 21:1-6](#)

[John 13:31-35](#)

Love one another!

No exceptions.

Love one another, just as I have loved you.

No exceptions.

It's pretty clear, right? I don't need to say anything else, right? Sermon done! Jesus made it very simple and clear.

OK! So, let's do this. Amen.

Thank you for coming to my TED Talk!

But, wait a second...

Are we really ready to love one another as Jesus loved us?

Just how much love are we talking about? This much [*small pinch*]? This much [*hands apart 18"*]? Jesus, do you mean THIS MUCH [*arms completely stretched open*]? All the time?

And, who exactly is this "one another"? Who am I supposed to love? Does it really include everyone here?

There is a poster increasingly popular in the Episcopal Church that says this. God Loves Everyone – No Exceptions!

No exceptions.

At Coeur d'Alene's Pride in the Park event coming up in June, we will be handing out stickers and materials that say just that – "God loves you. You are made in the image of God. That is true for every person – including you, who may have been told that you are worse than the worst sin imaginable – including you, who may have been treated by your own family or friends or religious groups as untouchable, as nothing more than a problem. God loves you. Come and find the loving embrace of God in Jesus." One small act. One small bit of presence and loving care, even when we anticipate that there will be people loosely associated with other groups who will come to confront and incite Pride with their violently bent anger and disgust at them. One small act, by a set of a few churches that together will say, "God loves you. And we open our arms to love you and welcome your love for God and for us and others."

We hear another Gospel text today from before Jesus' resurrection, before his crucifixion. In fact, it is just as Judas leaves on his personal mission to betray Jesus. And Jesus turns to those still in the room with him and says, "Now is the Son of Man glorified." Judas, who was in the room with Jesus and the others, was loved by Jesus, through to the end and beyond the end. There are traditions in the Christian faith that hold that Jesus, in the days he was dead, descended among the dead and burst through the gates of hell itself to free souls in bondage there, to reach out his hands and arms to all who would grab hold, and to lead them all out of bondage, and to empty the halls of hell. And on that journey through all the places of those considered lost, Jesus also was looking for his friend, Judas.

We were hit with the terrible news from Buffalo yesterday. What fresh horror we have, once again raising its head here in our nation! What fresh hell has been opened wide in our midst again. A young man – 18 years old! – intentionally planned and purchased gear for and drove 200 miles for a murderous attack on innocent people at a grocery store in Buffalo, NY. Black people. Targeted intentionally by a white young man barely coming through adolescence, with hatred, fear, and disgust possessing his heart and mind so that he could not possibly see Black people as beloved children of God but saw them only as a threat to his own position as a White person in society. 70 shots fired. 10 people dead, many more wounded. Entire families and neighborhoods ripped apart by a willful war of violence that he filmed and streamed on video from a camera attached to his helmet.

How is it that this child of God has become so warped, so twisted, so lost? How can God reach into his hell that he has sought and fostered and created for himself?

And, oh God Almighty and All-Loving, how can I – how can we – love such a person? And how can we love as fully as possible those whose lives have been and continue to be torn apart by the racism that continues to infect this country?

Jesus, just how much love do you mean? And, just who is the "one another" you are talking about?

If we follow the story forward, if we follow what happens in the early Church in the days after Jesus ascends and after the Holy Spirit sweeps in among and through the disciples and onward throughout the world around them, we find out that "one another" just keeps expanding. Just as Jesus said when he said "Love your neighbor" and then answered the question, "And who is my neighbor" with a story that faced listeners with the challenge to cross through their own prejudices and see their supposed adversaries as their neighbors. It's not just for us Judaeans anymore. It's for Samaritans. It's for people across this region. It's for people from every place we touch and every place that touches us. And so it spreads, as the Holy Spirit rushes out

before the disciples and touches people long before they ever arrive or think of arriving or think of even setting foot into spaces they would never have considered before. It's not just for us Whites anymore, and never was. It's for Blacks, and Asians, and Arabs, and Russians, and Latinos, and disabled people, and prisoners, and people who are different from us in gender and sexuality, and people who are trapped in their own terror or anger or any other mental or spiritual affliction.

The Holy Spirit keeps stretching us. Keeps stretching our imaginations, opening our eyes and ears, breaking through our mental barriers, softening the places we have hardened or had hardened for us in our hearts.

That is the wonderful, powerful thing that happens for Peter as he sets out on a journey he never expected to take. You may remember that Jesus at the end of John's Gospel says to Peter, "You used to dress yourself and decide where you were going to go. But the days are coming when another will put a belt on you and you will be led where you don't want to go." That promise was letting Peter know that, as he followed Jesus and fed and took care of Jesus' sheep (which is all people), he would not longer simply choose his own way but would follow paths chosen for him – even to his death. And that promise seems to begin to be fulfilled in this experience that Peter recounts for us in today's reading from Acts.

This experience of Peter began with a dream that shook up Peter's whole view of the world – starting with food. You know, they say that the way to opening hearts across cultures is through the sharing of food at the table. Our ventures in food open our minds and hearts by first opening our taste buds and our bellies.

So this dream is of a great sheet containing all kinds of animals – including beast of prey, and reptiles, and wild birds. Maybe the sheet also contained lobsters? I like to think it contained lobsters, and Dungeness crab.

Anyway, this dream opens up the vastness of God's approval to Peter. "What I have made clean, you must not call unclean." What I have loved and embraced, you must not refuse.

The sheet comes down, like we hear in the book of Revelation today about the new heaven and new earth, and a new Jerusalem coming down from heaven. A new heaven and new earth – see, God dwells with mortals!

And for Peter, like for the one seeing the vision in Revelation, God is saying, "See, I am making all things new."

"It is done!" – It is finished – It is accomplished – this simple statement should ring familiar for all of us – it is the final words of Christ Jesus, from the cross – it is the words of God-with-us, glorying in the self-sacrifice that is at the heart of God's nature, for all people and all creatures in all times and all places.

The new Jerusalem comes down when Christ is raised up – the new heaven and new earth are unleashed in God’s loving, total self-giving for the sake of the whole world.

So it is with us, now, as sharers in and bearers of Christ’s body. The new city of God opens wide its gates, the new heaven and new earth emerge, each moment when we as bearers of Christ’s presence give totally and freely of ourselves for the sake of others. The moment of self-giving, of loving sacrifice, is a moment of God re-creating the heavens and the earth. Not I, but Christ in me – and yet, I. Not you, but Christ in you – and yet, you. You, most fully you, doing what what is at the core of your being. You, I, we are made to love. We are reborn to love. And each time, in dying we are reborn.

Peter had to die a bit to himself. He had to let go of his assumptions and judgments, his sense of righteousness and rightness about what was acceptable and not acceptable to God. He had to let go of his reactions of revulsion and disgust. He had to let go of his fear, anxiety, and prejudice against the occupying Romans and their armies. He had to let go of his assumption of being a bringer of God’s light to those who he thinks are in darkness.

“I don’t want to touch that!” “I’m not supposed to even get close to that.” “That is not the way things are supposed to be.”

Back in my early days of social work in the cities of Normal and Bloomington, Illinois, I remember a family who was getting serious intervention from all sides. Their multi-generational family lived in a house that was on the verge of being condemned. Their lives were a bit chaotic. Grampa had worked for the railroad all his life, but did not have much of a pension to live on, and his wife did not work, and his daughters were mildly developmentally disabled and had difficulty holding jobs. One daughter had a daughter of her own who began to run into trouble in school and was truant. All of these matters ended up involving five different government, school, and social service organizations with the family. I remember the day a few of my colleagues and I went to their home to meet with them. Things were quite a mess in the yard and inside the house. Later, we learned that the upstairs tub was about to fall through the ceiling because the floor joists had been rotting away for a long time.

I remember how my colleagues came in the house and did not want to sit down on any of the furniture. They sat close to the edge of chairs, barely resting on the old cushions. I sat down with the folks in the room, and we got through some of the tough decisions that needed to be made. But I wondered if my colleagues knew what they were communicating in their behavior to the family, as they dealt with their own reactions of disgust and revulsion at the living conditions.

A similar situation came up months later when I needed to find a place for an elder mom and daughter to live after their landlord determined to evict them. Their apartment was well-maintained, and we had tried to fight for the tenants to stay. But things did not work out, and

they had no place to go. Like here, there was little affordable housing available, and there were not great alternative housing arrangements. I had to look in the next county. There, I found an old large farmhouse that had been converted into an elder home for older women. There were beds in multiple places. It reminded me of boarding houses from the early 1900s. But it was clean, and people were kind.

I remember how my colleagues were dismayed that this was to be their new home. They were thinking in terms of contemporary regulations and expectations.

In both these situations, my colleagues had a hard time adapting. I do think that the ways I had been formed in the Episcopal Church up to that point had taken root in me, and so I approached people much more freely with a readiness to take them as they were, to seek and serve Christ in them, and to respect each person's dignity. This story of Peter's vision resonated deep for me: "What I, God, have declared clean you must not call unclean."

And God has said, "See I am making all things new. Here, there is now beginning a new heaven and new earth." This vision of John of the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven is intimately related to Peter's vision of the sheet filled with all sorts of critters great and small. God is opening heaven and bringing down the new city of God, like a sheet that stretches across the sky, filled with every creature and every person imaginable!

This is the heart of the Christian vision of how God will mend and remake the whole creation. Catch a glimpse of it. What will the earth look like when all seek the glory of God and the love of Emmanuel? When swords are beat into plowshares, when the city stands wide open for all, when the canopy spreads wide to hold every person and culture and creature?

It has already begun, and begins anew with us each day and each moment. When we open ourselves to others and open wide our arms to give and receive, that is a moment of the city of God breaking through the clouds and touching the earth. When we follow Jesus with love, courage, and daring openness, we find that the world grows before us, we find ourselves stretched wider in love, we find that God has made more clean than we ever imagined. The world brightens and broadens in the wild abandon of the Holy Spirit's reckless embrace. All is being made new! And you and I, we together, are part of that adventure of the Acts of the Holy Spirit. Try to keep up! Follow, friends, and don't hold back.