

If you love me

The book of Acts recounts the story of Cornelius, who was a centurion in the Roman army. He was a Gentile, but the Jews knew him to be a good man who gave alms generously and prayed constantly to God. One day Cornelius had a vision in which an angel came to him and said, "Your prayers have come before God. Send men to the town of Joppa, and find a certain Peter who is staying at the home of Simon the tanner.

The next day Peter, at the home of Simon. He was hungry and while the food was being prepared, he went up on the roof to pray. There he had a vision that a something like a huge sheet was coming down from heaven, being lowered to the ground. It was filled with all kinds of animals, including reptiles and birds, and a voice said, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat." Since these animals were considered to be unclean, Peter answered, "By no means, Lord, I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice then told him, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This vision occurred three times and suddenly the sheet was taken up to heaven.

While Peter was reflecting on all this, the visitors from Cornelius arrived at the gate. The Spirit told Peter, "These men are searching for you, go down to them immediately." Peter met them and they told him of Cornelius' story and how they were sent to find him. Peter invited them in and gave them food and lodging.

The next day Peter went with these men, along with some of the believers living in Joppa. They made the journey to Caesarea to see Cornelius. There the centurion had gathered many of his relatives and friends. Peter said, "You know that it is not lawful for a Jew to visit a Gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call anything profane or unclean. So, when I was sent for, I came without hesitation. Peter then learned that Cornelius had received a visit from an angel that fit with his own vision from God. So, Peter began to teach this gathering of Gentiles about Jesus, and all that God had done in him and through him. And Peter told of the resurrection and how Jesus appeared to the disciples and told them to proclaim the good news.

We now come to the passage from the book of Acts that he heard this morning. "While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening. The

believers who had accompanied Peter on this journey were astonished. They heard the Gentiles speaking tongues, like the disciples did on the Day of Pentecost. They were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles. And Peter declared, “Can anyone withhold these people from being baptized? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” So, Cornelius and his family and all the people gathered were baptized. And Peter was invited to stay with them for several days.

What does it mean to be Christian? What does it mean to follow Jesus? You might answer that to be a Christian means belonging to the community we call the Church. You might explain that the Christian Church believes certain things, and those beliefs define us as Christians. We even have a word that describes which beliefs are right. The word is “orthodox” from the word, “orthos” which means right or straight, and the word “doxos” which means opinion or belief. So, when someone believes the right things about God, Jesus, humanity, the church, and so on, we say that their beliefs are orthodox.

The church has long valued orthodoxy and has been using that word as far back as the 3rd or 4th century. Orthodoxy helps us to see how various doctrines and ideas measure up to foundational, correct beliefs. For example, we have the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed, declaring that we believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit – what we know as the Trinity. To be a Christian is to believe that. Orthodoxy also shapes our worship, as we believe in the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Eucharist, as Christians have done from the earliest days of the Church, going all the way back to the scriptures.

Being a Christian is about right beliefs, yes. That is important. But throughout much of Church history, we have worried far too much about orthodoxy – who has the correct beliefs, and who is doesn’t. Who is doing baptism the right way, by immersion or by pouring water over one’s head? Who gets to be included in communion? Who and what is profane and to be excluded and who and what is God declaring holy and including? Theological battles have been fought, and wars have been waged over orthodoxy, over questions like these. The truth is, Jesus has very little to say about orthodoxy. Really. Jesus asks us, commands us, to love.

Believing is only part of what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus. John writes in his letter that to believe, to be born of God is to love God and love one

another. It is not enough just to *believe* that we ought to love God and others. We are given the commandment to *love* God. We are called *to love* others. Like Jesus, we are called to live as God desires for us: to live a life of joy and love.

That brings us to the passage we heard from the gospel of John. This section of John recalls Jesus being with his disciples at the Last Supper. The words harken back to the scripture we hear on Maundy Thursday of Holy Week. That night Jesus told his friends, "I give you a new commandment." The Latin translation is "Mandatum novum do vobis." The word *mandatum* – commandment – is where we get the English word "maundy." This is the commandment given to us by Jesus: You are to love one another as I have loved you. Those words are repeated to his disciples that evening. We heard them again this morning. It is Jesus telling his friends, and telling us, what it means to follow him. It is Jesus' own words of what it means to be a Christian.

Pay attention to what Jesus is saying. Jesus did *not* say, "To follow me is not to have strict orthodox beliefs. Jesus did not say, "If you love me, you will believe the following five or six church doctrines." Jesus did not say, "If you love me, you will use only the Book of Common Prayer for worship, along with other authorized liturgies approved for use by the Episcopal Church."

This is what Jesus said to his disciples, "Love God with your whole heart. Love your neighbor as yourself." And on the last night of his life, Jesus told his friends, "As has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love. If you love me, keep my commandment, and the new commandment I give you is this: that you love one another as I have loved you. Jesus said to his disciples, "Follow me." Don't just think about me; abide in me. Know that I live in you. Live in me.

Peter had orthodox beliefs about what was clean and what was profane according to centuries of orthodox Jewish rules, and God told Peter, "We're not going to follow that anymore; do not call profane what I the Lord have called Holy. I am declaring all people holy, even a Roman soldier, even the Gentiles." Peter wasn't told to reinforce the dividing line between who is in and who is out. Peter was shown a vision from coming down from heaven that included everything. Then Peter moved into action: he was told to visit a Roman soldier in another city, and he went. Peter was asked to preach to the outsiders, the Gentiles, and he told them all about Jesus. Peter saw the Holy Spirit come to the people of Caesarea, and he invited them to be baptized, and

he stayed with the people of this community and share meals and hospitality with them.

I like to think that as Peter entered into Caesarea and met all these strangers, he might have remembered Jesus' words from the last supper: "Love others as I have loved you." Love one another, see them as God's children, watch the Holy Spirit at work in them. Did Peter bend or break a few orthodox rules according to his tradition? Yes, but I don't really care. And I don't think Jesus cares, either. Is life being brought to others, is God's grace and hope being given to those who had been outsiders? Well then, Pete, you're doing all right. This is what love looks like. This is what it looks like to love others, to love everyone, as Jesus loves us.

We are called to follow Jesus. That means we are called to love. May God bless us in our beliefs, but most of all in our words and actions, in the way we try to love one another as Jesus loves. Amen.

Trace Browning

6th Sunday of – Year B

Acts 10:44-48 • Psalm 98 • 1 John 5:1-6 • John 15:9-17

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