

Sermon - *“Love - all the time”*

Having made his way back from his mission among the despised and distrusted Gentiles, Peter makes his case by describing his vision. A strange kind of vision for those of us raised on abundance; on food without ritual limits. Peter has seen beyond the limits of his cultural fears, and trusted God for the result – which is the Holy Spirit given to those same despised and distrusted Gentiles, whom now must be called siblings in faith, children of the Most High, beloved friends of Jesus.

It's quite a moment.

As a twenty-first century human, I'm doubtful that the change of heart among those who accosted Peter was so swift and complete. Sure, this changing of hearts and minds (among the Gentiles AND those first friends of Jesus) was a miracle in its own right, but when has there ever been a religious gathering that, when trying to decide on its membership, did not endure some continuing squabbling and grumbling – no matter how convincing the argument, or vivid the vision of divine permission may be...

So maybe, just this once, love ruled the day.

So close after that other foundational miracle of the faith; the resurrection. That must be the answer. The lessons of Easter still cling tightly to this band of Jesus' folk. The memories of those astonished apostles telling anyone who would listen that Jesus is risen; the breakfast on the beach – the encounter at Emmaus – the stories of Jesus are more than a nine-days' wonder by the time the Acts of the Apostles makes it to print - written, as it was, to keep the memories fresh – to

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explain the enthusiasm of the emerging church. And this is how it moves from being an expression of a Jewish longing for a divine kingdom to something else altogether.

It must have been love.

But, as fascinating as Peter's vision may have been – as formative as his work among the Gentiles was – it is the gospel that grabs my attention.

Sure, we're back in the pre-Easter portion of John's gospel; that's what intrigues me. We don't always get to hear this bit of Jesus' instruction in Holy week, and when we do, we are too soon distracted by what comes next. For Judas has just taken off into the darkness, and darker things soon follow. Yet here on the brink of betrayal, Jesus speaks of glory, and commands his confused disciples to live in love. 'The best way to get the message to the world,' says Jesus, 'is by loving one another.'

By now the stage is set, and Jesus knows what's coming. "I go where you cannot follow,' he says – and he will go to the high priest – then to Pilate. Then to the hands of the Roman soldiers. Ultimately to a grisly death and a new rock tomb. And they won't follow – except for the women. The disciples will run and hide and worry and wonder. And knowing this about his friends, Jesus commands them to love one another – in spite of everything; because of everything – love one another.

Jesus didn't say 'because soon it will be harder.'" Harder to get along when the teacher is not present; harder to live in hopeful love when the sky is black as pitch

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and the authorities are scrambling to maintain a hold on power. Jesus didn't say 'remember the good times with fondness,' or 'try to be cheerful through the hard times.' He said “Love one another,” and that is the legacy we must tend to.

To love one another – even when we disagree. To love when it would be easier to criticize. To love when circumstances make it difficult to speak, or visit, or offer even the simplest kind of sympathy. That is key to our witness as followers of Jesus.

This is a 'Jesus lesson' that the church needs to take seriously – now, more than ever. When the world is more fractious; when tempers are frayed; when everyone seems desperate and our anxiety about the future is vivid and sharp. The love that identifies us as disciples of Jesus is crucial; “by this everyone will know...” says Jesus.

The world longs for hope – and Jesus offers hope. Not just the hope of the resurrection – though that isn't nothing. Jesus models a manner of living and engaging with humanity that seeks the best in each person. Those whom Jesus met and healed are 'returned to themselves.' Each one is seen by Jesus, not as an outcast or a menace, but as a child of God. The love Jesus encourages us to offer one another is the love he had for all he met. This is the foundation of the promised peaceable kingdom. This is the hope we are commanded to offer the world in Jesus' name. And it starts with loving one another.

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I heard, on the radio the other day, a song by a band I'd been grooving to since high school. Genesis is one of those bands that I never tire of listening too, and in the mid 80's, they offered a song titled "Land of Confusion." The chorus is what caught my ear this week:

This is the time, this is the place
So we look for the future
But there's not much love to go 'round
Tell me why this is a land of confusion

There's not much love to go 'round. Jesus knew what the solution was long before Phil Collins called it a problem. Love one another, Jesus said. Set an example, like Jesus did.

Now, I don't pretend to know anything about Phil Collins' spiritual state, but the last half of the chorus sounds suspiciously like something Jesus MIGHT have said (but full credit to Anthony Banks / Michael Rutherford / Phillip Collins)

This is the world we live in
And these are the hands we're given
Use them and let's start trying
To make it a place worth living in

And love is the best place to start.