

John 15 & Acts 10: The Love Commandment

Whenever our texts come from the Gospel of John, it is clear that the focus of that community was on the commandment given to the disciples at their final time of Table fellowship with their teacher and leader, Jesus of Nazareth, who said plainly in John 13: 34—"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Hearing these words spoken to those who have followed him around the Galilean countryside and then into Jerusalem, the disciples might not have felt that was a hard task for them. In the reading from John for today, we hear again about love, love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father and the love for them which will lead to Jesus laying down his life for them. He also here reminds them that he has chosen them to be his disciples. So hearing this "new" commandment probably didn't seem that new in some ways. After all, they had been together and united with this teacher for a while, and while many of the things he said confused them—this particular teaching probably seemed straight forward—after all they were a community formed from folks of the same religious tradition with many of the same cultural norms. Then comes the events we have recalled of Holy Week, the suffering and death of their leader and their fear. As the news of the resurrection comes to them, although they are confused and still fearful—through all of these astounding experiences, they remain together—a community banded together through their relationship with Jesus and their shared experiences. During the coming week, Thursday to be exact, the church's calendar marks an important event, one of the few not celebrated on a Sunday. It is the day when the gospels relate that Jesus took the disciples into the countryside and gave them a task. He has told them before that they were to be sent, but as he ascends into the clouds he puts a definition on the task. We are most familiar with it as it appears in Matthew's gospel as the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." As the Book of Acts begins, the disciples having watched Jesus' ascension return to Jerusalem to await what has been promised to them—the coming of the Holy Spirit which will baptize them with fire. This text will appear in two weeks as we celebrate that coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, but the passages before us today consider the disciples' activity after the Holy Spirit has arrived—and as we read them we can see that what is happening is NOT something that they anticipated—and in many ways they are NOT comfortable with the changes being asked of them. The Holy Spirit is including Samaritans? A eunuch from Ethiopia? What is happening? Whatever it going on, it is certainly not happening as they expected. The text I read is the final verses of chapter 10 which relates an involved story about the activity of the Holy Spirit moving to change all that these people understood about what God desired of them. In a text we won't consider, Peter has gone down to Joppa at the request of some believers. While there he stays with a tanner named Simon; someone who according to Jewish tradition is ritually unclean and thus not someone with whom he should have contact. But that just reflects a small ripple in the changes in acceptance being asked of Peter by the Holy Spirit. Chapter 10, which reads like the script to a play, begins in Caesarea, a Roman City on the Mediterranean Sea which served as a base for the Roman legion. Cornelius, who is a

centurion in the Italian Cohort lives there. We are told he is a devout man who fears God, who gives alms generously to the people and with his whole household prays to God. It seems one afternoon, about 3 o'clock, Cornelius has a vision in which he clearly sees an angel of God who tells him his prayers and alms have drawn the attention of God. Because of this, he is to send men to Joppa "for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon the tanner." Scene two begins the next day when Cornelius sends 3 men off to Joppa to find Peter. At this point there is a change of scene and narrative switches to Joppa and what the Peter is doing. It's noon, about lunch time and Peter is on the roof praying when he becomes hungry. "While waiting for it to be prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven open and something like a large sheet coming down." Now on this large sheet were all the animals that were forbidden for a devout Jew to eat. Peter hears a voice from heaven telling him to get up, kill and eat. But Peter's response is that he has never eaten anything profane or unclean. The voice's reply to this is: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." The voice repeats this command to kill and eat twice more before the sheet goes back up into heaven. Peter is puzzled by this vision—this presentation of the unclean which he is told to kill and eat; something he understands as a part of his obedience to God that he may not do; the dietary restrictions are part of the way his entire life has been formed as one of God's chosen. Yet, just as he is puzzling over what this may mean, Cornelius' messengers have arrived and the voice again offers him some instructions: These men have come looking for you—go with them. The next scene unfolds as after some conversation with the men, the next day Peter goes with them to the home of Cornelius—a Gentile. When Peter arrives he finds that Cornelius has assembled quite a gathering—his relatives and his friends. Peter's first reaction to this group is to say: "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile—but then connects this visit to the vision he had saying, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean—so when I was sent for I came without objection." Peter then asks Cornelius why he had sent for him—Cornelius then replays his vision and asks Peter to relay the message that God had given him to them. Peter begins his message this way: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him—and then Peter relates the good news of the risen Jesus Christ. This is the point at which the text for today begins. Peter is sharing the gospel news to a Gentile household. "As Peter was STILL speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. " The next verse tells us that Peter had not come to Caesarea alone, but was accompanied by some "circumcised" believers—that is Jews who had become followers of Christ. It is their reaction which is interesting—after knowing Jesus' commandment to love; after knowing of Peter's vision which brought them there, after learning of Cornelius' experience which led to his sending for Peter—they are "astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out—even on the Gentiles. "Astounded" that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been given—even to the Gentiles. As this final scene is enacted, notice that the Holy Spirit does not wait for Peter to finish speaking—it is as Jesus told the original twelve in our passage from John 15: "You did not choose me but I chose you." God does not wait upon human endeavors but works within them to accomplish God's own purpose. Peter's final words as the final scene in this passage closes are: "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" That is a question which Philip answered in last week's text with the baptism of the

eunuch. That is a question which Peter answered this week with the baptism of Cornelius' household. That is a question with which we sometimes still struggle as we formulate opinions about whom God finds acceptable. There is a popular form of taking a visual picture and imposing some sayings upon it. These pictures are then called memes. One which seemed particularly relevant to me this week as I prepared this message was posted to my Facebook page. It shows the familiar scene of Jesus teaching to a crowd on a hillside—Jesus is shown to be saying: “A new command I give you, Love one another.” In the middle there are some words from the crowd—“But what if they don't agree with us....Then at the bottom, Jesus says, “Let's try this one more time....It seems that that is often our response to God. We are mired in the norms and the conventions of our society when we look at others—like the early followers who were Jewish and had trouble giving up their rituals of circumcision and dietary restrictions which separated them from others. We too have a tendency to look around with those filters in place and fail to see all the places where the Holy Spirit is moving. We too want to place restrictions on that new commandment of Jesus which had no qualifiers attached. That love command—love one another—is not a simple or easy one if we look at the world through the eyes of the one we invite to abide in us—but it is the way Jesus taught and the Holy Spirit moves. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.