

## Deciding Who Is In

There is a tendency among us to form groups...to gather together and form groups of people who then define a characteristic which makes anyone new that they encounter a part of that group or not. This tendency means that once that characteristic is defined anyone not having it is not in the group. That seems to have been a process that has existed as long as we have information about human activities and communities. The author Jean Aurel wrote a series of novels called *Earth's Children* set in prehistoric Europe which gives a fictionalized description of human activity during that time. Beginning with *The Clan of the Bear* she uses archeological findings to incorporate into the novel how the various groups which evolved seem to have interacted. That particular book describes interactions between the Neanderthal and the Cro-Magnon peoples. It has now been shown that these two groups did exist at the same time, and that their interactions were not always friendly. Despite the vast number of changes throughout history it seems that something that almost always happens when people who come from different cultures interact, the interactions are not always friendly. During some periods of time the "difference" marker is obvious...which has resulted in the creation of the artificial concept of race; a concept based on the obvious markers of skin color, hair texture and shape or color of eyes. Yet the truth is that genetically all these factors are caused by about 1% of the human genetic code. That means that all humans share 99% of what makes us human. We are more alike than different despite our cultural decisions. Today it seems that the traits or characteristics which define a group are even less obvious or have a basis that makes one individual acceptable or unacceptable to another harder to explain. Today's gospel reading comes from the latter portion of the Maundy Thursday text where we are reminded that the word Maundy comes from the Latin meaning commandment because Jesus' disciples are given a "new" one. Within this text about Jesus' last meal with his disciples we have his statement about how those who follow him are to be known by outsiders. John 13: 34-35, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." The text of Acts is all about how differently the Holy Spirit understood this commandment from the way those disciples present at that meal were inclined to interpret it. So far in our walk through this Easter Season we have not yet reached either the Ascension of Christ or the Pentecost's celebration marking the arrival of the Holy Spirit among the disciples. Today's reading from Acts however records some events after those two occasions. At the Ascension as recorded in Matthew, when Jesus ascends he gives what we call the Great Commission—to go out into the world and proclaim the message they have received—the good news of God's love and what that means for the world. After Pentecost, the disciples quit hiding and do go out to proclaim the message that God has entered the world through Jesus and his teachings. The initial portion of Acts tells how active the Holy Spirit is among them; great numbers of people hear and accept the message. And that is where today's reading is so informative. Jesus and all his disciples were Jews, faithful Jews who considered themselves obedient to the Laws given by Moses. Yet as it becomes apparent some of the things they have used to define someone chosen by God may not have actually been God's own proclamation and desire. The disciples are sent to bring the message to those in Samaria—a people proscribed by the current religious authorities. We have seen Peter venturing outside of

Jerusalem in his role of flock tender. Today's passage tells us something about one of those journeys and the events as well as what resulted when the news got back to Jerusalem and the others. Peter has been in Lydda and in Joppa visiting some believers but an interesting detail is that while in Joppa he stays with Simon, the tanner. Being a tanner was an occupation that made a person unclean according to the current understanding of the religious orders of priest and Pharisees. Yet Peter was staying there when he had a vision while praying. Today's passage recounts Peter's retelling of that vision in which a large sheet descends from heaven upon it are various animals which are on the unclean list. As this happens a voice tells Peter to "Get up, kill and eat." Peter's response is that of an orthodox faithful member of his faith tradition: "But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'" This vision of descending sheet with animals and the command to eat happens three times. This is his response despite Peter's knowing that Jesus taught that uncleanness came from what emerged from one's mouth not what entered it. However Peter continues his report on his time in Joppa by saying as the vision ended, three men arrived at the door with a message for him—an invitation to come to the home of Cornelius, a gentile living in Caesarea. They have come because Cornelius had been told by an angel to send to Joppa to invite Peter to come to his home with a message for them. Peter is about to refuse when he feels the Holy Spirit is telling he must go and "not to make a distinction between them and us." When Peter arrives and gives Cornelius' household the message, Peter relates to the disciples who had remained in Jerusalem that "as soon as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord and how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'" Peter's conclusion about his vision and experience was that that God's creations—all of them were clean and acceptable in God's sight. That if God found it acceptable, if the Holy Spirit came to them then who had could "hinder God"? In our current world, where the standards or measures or traits for inclusion into a group have become so defining and finite, how do we then understand and apply the commandment given by Jesus to love others as he has loved us; especially in light of the revelation to Peter by vision and the word of the angel that so many previously considered unclean and unacceptable only belonged in those groups because of human definitions, not God's decree. The text from John today in only 32 words gives a powerful guide, yet a difficult one to enact: "Love others as I have loved you." We believe that we are included in that love given to us by God; but often we fail to live into that belief that those not like us are included. The command was not to act like we love others, but to actually love them. That is our ideal and goal. As G.K. Chesterton once wrote: "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried." Imagine what would happen to us, to the church universal and to the world, if we took this commandment of Jesus' seriously? What could Christendom look like if we obeyed orders and cultivated "impossible" love? Most of us know how to do things, we know how to gather up school tools or other things to send for aid to those in distress; we know how to write checks for charitable causes. But do we know how to love as Jesus loved? To feel compassion so deep it hurts? To experience a hunger for justice so powerful we rearrange our lives to pursue it? To empathize with the distress of others so deeply our hearts break? Actually, do we want to do this? Most of the time we prefer to be comfortable and safe; we want to choose the people we love based on our own affinities and preferences—not on Jesus' all-inclusive commandment. Charitable actions are easy; but

cultivating our hearts...that preparing and pruning it to love...becoming vulnerable in authentic ways to the world's pain and suffering...those things are hard and costly. Yet that is what Jesus has asked of us because our God first and foremost wants every one of God's children to feel loved...not shamed...not punished...not chastised...not judged...not isolated...but loved. But that's not all. Jesus follows his commandment with an exhilarating and terrifying promise: "*By this everyone will know.*" Meaning, love is the litmus test of Christian witness. Our love for each other is how the world will know who we are and whose we are. Our love for each other is how the world will see, taste, touch, hear, and find Jesus. It's through our love that we will embody Jesus, make Jesus relatable, possible, plausible, to a dying world. That's a scary thought. What Jesus seems to be saying is that if we fail to love one another, the world *won't* know what it needs to know about God and God's love, and in the terrible absence of that knowing, it will believe falsehoods that break God's heart. The falsehood that the whole Jesus thing is a sham. The falsehood that there really is no transformative power in the resurrection because we have not shown its reality. The view is then that God is a mean, angry, vindictive parent, determined only to shame and punish his children. That view makes the universe a cold, meaningless place, ungoverned by love. That the Church is only a flawed and hypocritical institution — not Christ's living, breathing, healing body on earth. Such is the power we wield in our decisions to love or not love others. Such are the stakes involved in how we choose to respond to Jesus's dying wish, hope, prayer, and commandment. Such is the responsibility we shoulder, whether we want to or not as disciples called to serve and witness. But here's our saving grace: Jesus doesn't leave us alone and bereft. We are not direction-less in the wilderness. He gives us a road map, a clear and beautiful way forward: "*As I have loved you.*" Follow my example, he says. Do what I do. Love as I love. Live as you have seen me live. Weep with those who weep. Laugh with those who laugh. Touch the untouchables. Feed the hungry. Welcome the child. Release the captive. Forgive the sinner. Confront the oppressor. Comfort the oppressed. Wash each other's feet. Hold each other close. Tell each other the truth. Guide each other home. So on the one hand, loving one another as Jesus has loved encompasses the mundane; it means serving one another, even in the most menial tasks. On the other hand, this love encompasses heroic acts of great risk; it extends even to the point of giving one's life for another. Since this is how we are known, how Jesus is known, how we do this is very important. Here in chapter 13, Jesus demonstrates his love for the same disciples who will fail him miserably. Jesus washes and feeds Judas who will betray him, Peter who will deny him, and all the rest who will fail to stand by him in his hour of greatest distress. The love that Jesus demonstrates is certainly not based on the merit of the recipients, and Jesus commands his disciples to love others in the same way. So Jesus' love for us is not based on our merits, but on God's love for us. We disciples of Jesus have continually fallen far short in our love for one another as well as in our love for those outside the community of faith. Theological and ethical arguments often descend into personal attacks and name-calling; personal interests often trump the common good of the community; those in need of compassion find judgment instead. Jesus could not be clearer: It is not by our theological correctness, not by our moral purity, not by our impressive knowledge that everyone will know that we are his disciples. It is quite simply by our loving acts—acts of service and sacrifice, acts that point to the love of God for the world made known in Jesus Christ. And as we read about the movement of the Holy Spirit as recorded in the Book of Acts, that activity

which sent Peter and the others into places they had considered unclean and forbidden; to share meals with those people and include them as brothers and sisters in God's family, we have the pattern for what God has shown us; we are called to think about who God is telling us is included within God's love...and that inclusion is not our decision to make...God has already decided who's in, we are just asked to love and care for them. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.