

Fifth Sunday of Easter

The Rev. Dr. Gail Shafer

May 19, 2019

Year C RCL

- [Acts 11:1-18](#)
- [Revelation 21:1-6](#)
- [John 13:31-35](#)
- [Psalm 148](#)

"See, I am making all things new."

In Jesus day, and in the time of the apostles, there was a clear distinction between Jews and everybody else. And Jews weren't to mingle with "the other". As the Christian community began to grow, everyone who heard the Good News, wanted to join the Jesus movement. The message of love, of peace, of inclusion was welcomed by Greeks, and Romans, Ethiopians, and Egyptians, even many Jews. At first, Peter did not want to include those "others" in the call to baptism. Even after baptism, some of the earliest members of the church who were Jews first, felt there should be separation from those who had been circumcised, and those who had not. They demanded those who were new be circumcised and follow the dietary laws, basically become Jews. If they did not, then there was to be a separation. They weren't even supposed to eat together. That interfered with worship, because the Eucharist involved a meal.

Then Peter was given a clear message in his dream. God did not want separation between peoples. From then on, he knew that it was God's design that there should be no separation between members. Everyone was to be welcomed as equals.

When Peter went to the Gentiles in Caesarea, and they received the Holy Spirit in the same way that the apostles had received the Holy Spirit – there could no longer be any doubt. It was his responsibility to baptize them, so they would have the outward sign of inclusion in the community of Christ. And he accepted them fully. They ate together, lived together in community. God had removed the taboos that might have split the infant church. All are welcome, no exceptions.

There are so many promises and delights if we choose to follow Jesus' Way. We are told that if we accept God, and Jesus as our savior, and love one another, there will be no more death. No more sorrow, no more tears. Our loved ones will never be parted from us. Hunger and thirst will be a thing of the past.

What stops us from taking that step? What is it about us humans that makes us have to have an "us" and "them"?

We often ask whether someone deserves our love, our servanthood. It is them that we need to remember that we are saved by grace, not by any of our own

acts. Because we are saved, we do good works, because we know that Christ gave everything for us – even though we were not yet born, even though we are not worthy of absolute forgiveness and unconditional love.

Remember that Christ knew who would betray him, and yet he washed the feet of Judas.

Peter, who had grown up a devout Jew, had prejudices about dietary restrictions, things that were considered profane and unclean, and people who were not Jews. But God told him that he was doing a new thing. That Peter did not have the power to find things profane or unclean if God did not. He had to undergo a paradigm shift that must have been profoundly difficult. Peter became the model for the teaching of St. Frances.

St. Francis de Sales was once approached by a disciple who said to him, “Sir, you speak so much about the love of God, but you never tell us how to

achieve it. Won’t you tell me how one comes to love God?”

St. Francis replied, “There is only one way and that is to love Him.”

“But you don’t understand my question. What I asked was, ‘How do you engender this love of God?’”

Again, Francis said, “By loving Him.”

Once again, the pupil came back with the same question. “But what steps do you take? Just what do you do to come into the possession of this love?”

And all St. Francis would say was,

“You begin by loving and you go on loving, and loving teaches you how to love. And the more you love, the more you are able to love.”

If we apply St. Francis instruction to the question “How do I learn to love someone that I don’t know, or fear, or do not understand, or have always been taught to hate?” We learn to love the other by loving them. We learn to forgive by forgiving.

It is something we practice every day in our relationships with our families and friends, even with our co-workers. Something I have had to learn to practice is to forgive the small things. The dirty dishes in the sink next to the dishwasher. The misplaced book, or forgotten chore. The quick unkind retort, or ignored message.

These lessons were learned the hard way. Those I loved were suddenly gone. And I would give anything to have to forgive them of some little thing. So now I practice forgiving the little things. By practicing forgiveness of the small things, we learn to forgive the bigger things. By loving those who love us, we learn to love

those who are different than us. We learn to accept those differences, and find that they are really insignificant.

Yesterday, I was privileged to meet the four candidates for bishop of Michigan.

And I am here to tell you of a sure thing. The next bishop of Michigan will be a woman. All four of the outstanding candidates were women. Two of them spoke to their early childhood dreams of becoming priests were sheer fantasy. Women were not even considered for any form of ordination in the Episcopal church when they were children. Now all four are leaders in their dioceses, in their congregations, and in their communities.

I am in a unique position, because I have one foot in two dioceses. The transitions in both the Diocese of Western Michigan as Bishop Hougland takes on the role of Bishop Provisional in the Eastern Diocese, and Michigan as Bishop Gibbs retires and a new individual picks up the reins.

I feel like I am being bathed in ideas for our congregation. Ideas to sustain our health, and ways to reach out to the community as a place of hope, love, and support. It is an exciting time. After hearing those women speak about their belief in the possibilities for our church going forward, and the Invite, Welcome, Connect conference last week, I am more than hopeful for our future as a parish,

and as a church. It is going to call for courage, and flexibility, and joy as we reach out to our neighbors with love.

Do you remember that old folk hymn, “they will know we are Christians by our love, by our love, they will know we are Christian by our love.”? It is my dream that we will be able to live into the words of that song. The time of “us” and “Them” will be long past. We will embrace each other, and there will be only “us.”