

Easter 5C Sermon 050210
Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148
Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

In the name of the Risen Lord, Amen.

A Scottish atheist was spending a quiet day fishing when suddenly his boat was attacked by the Loch Ness monster. In one easy flip, the beast tossed him high into the air. Then it opened its mouth to swallow him. As the man sailed head over heels toward the gaping maw of the beast he cried out, “Oh, my God! Help me!” All at once, time froze. The atheist stopped flying through the air, the monster was frozen in place, even the wind stopped blowing. Then the atheist heard a booming voice from the clouds, “Angus, I thought you didn’t believe in me?” “Oh ... come on, God. A minute ago I didn’t believe in the Loch Ness monster, either!”

“(W)ho was I that I could hinder God?” This is the question we heard St. Peter ask to the leaders of the Christian Church in Jerusalem from the Acts of the Apostles reading. But what was it that made the leaders of the Church angry with Peter? What was it that had them so up in arms that it required Peter to defend himself by recounting a heavenly vision he had had – one that convinced him there was no distinction between Jewish Christian and Gentile convert? It was – in a word – change – change in the requirements for converting to Christianity.

Now for us, whether or not someone had to become a Jew before he could become a Christian seems like a sort of quaint thing to argue over. Like something read in a

junior high history book; an historical tale that bears no relation to our time. Much like the cost of a tea tax seems like a strange thing over which to begin a revolution that resulted in our becoming a sovereign nation; or the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand being the event that triggered World War I. We know on some level that these stories have something to do with us ... but it is only in some distant, dust covered way; not in any way that is really “connected” to our lives here and now.

Well ... let’s look at the situation in the 11th Chapter of Acts and see if perhaps it is more closely related to our time than we think.

When the early Church was in its infancy, in the time after Jesus Christ had Ascended into Heaven and had left the Holy Spirit as the comforter and guide to the original Apostles; there was a division amongst the leaders of the Church (something we certainly never see in our age). One side – a sort of a hard-line group – believed that because the Jews were God’s chosen people and Jesus was a Jew, everyone who wanted to follow Jesus must become a Jew as well. This group was epitomized by the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem. But St. Paul – and in today’s passage, St. Peter – had become convinced that Gentiles could be converted to Christianity by simple repentance and baptism – doing away with the requirement of circumcision and adherence to dietary restrictions.

Again, this whole argument seems very far removed from us. But it really is not. You see, what the Jewish Christians were defending was what they felt was their very

identity as people of God. For generations, the Jews had suffered under the regimes of different occupying nations. They had been exiled by the conquering Babylonians. During the time of the exile, the idea had been that the Jews would become “converted” by the surrounding culture – a process known as “enculturation.” But because the Jews were God’s chosen people, they kept themselves pure and separate from the surrounding culture by strictly adhering to the cultural and dietary rules set out in the Levitical code.

You see, following the law of the first five books of Bible became like flying a national flag for the Jews. They were – and wanted to remain – completely identifiable by their adherence to the laws of Moses. And along came the Apostle Peter and this firebrand guy Paul, challenging what they knew about God and how God operated in the world. God was perhaps changing things – recreating things – and that was a big deal!

In this morning’s reading from the Revelation to John, we hear the voice of the One seated on the holy throne saying, “See, I am making all things new.” I would submit to you that *we* are faced with small versions of God making all things new, changing things, all the time – and that we fight back against these changes – these perceived attacks on how we understand God – with the same ferocity as did the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem when they were faced with Gentiles in their midst.

How many times have things happened in the church (whether the Episcopal Church USA, or St. John’s) that constituted change, in other words old “things being made new” and you have heard it said, or perhaps said yourself, “why do things always

have to change? I liked things just the way they are.” Or more importantly, haven’t we seen people who perceive their religion being under attack lash out at the “offending” person (or group) and begin to demonize that person or group so as to create an “us versus them” dichotomy, thereby making it easy to begin to hate “those others” who are “not like us.”

This setting up of boundaries between those who are in and those who are out is what American society prides itself in doing. In every American city we have gated communities – places designed to separate those who are economically in from those who are out. Our legislators in Washington passed a law a few years ago that called for the erection of a 700 mile long fence along the border between the U.S. and Mexico to make visually clear who is in and who is out. It would not stop people from breaking our immigration laws; it would really only be a visual reminder of the border between us. In the news today there are countless stories in which people take sides over a new Arizona law designed to criminalize the status of those who are out, but act as if they are in. And in countless other areas in our society, we place those who are different from us in separate quarters so that those who are in and those who are out do not have to interact.

The Church though, is supposed to be different from the culture that surrounds it. Just like the ancient Jews wanted to maintain their distinction from the pagan culture that surrounded them, so too is the modern Church supposed to be counter-cultural. Jesus was the ultimate counter-cultural figure. But not because he walled Himself off from the

culture around Him. Instead, it was because He refused to see the culture in the same way that everyone else did. He refused to be bound by what the culture told Him.

See, I am making all things new. ...

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another

I am not a wise man. I am not one of the great thinkers of this age. I don't pretend to have simple answers to life's complicated questions. But I do know this: if the Church – and by that I mean St. John's in particular and the Episcopal Church as well as the universal Church in general – does not start acting counter-culturally by trying to make all things new and by living out the radical commandment to love one another just as Christ loves us, then the Church is going to die.

When we – the Church – become happy and content with the way things are; when we say to ourselves and to the culture around us, “we've got a good thing right here, and we won't change anything,” we are beginning the process of shutting down. The Holy Spirit is that wild and untamed aspect of God and to deny or resist change is to deny or resist that same Spirit – the Spirit which is life itself. Dean Will Willimon recently wrote,

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When we settle down and become parochial (*in other words, when we settle for being “just the Church”*), the Holy Spirit drifts elsewhere; Jesus **leaves** us as his miraculous, heavenly inspired movement keeps on the move. There is something about Jesus that refuses to bed down with the sheep who are either too unimaginative or decrepit to wander. (*Willimon continues*) I just closed a church after a 70-year run. Their dying words

were, “There is no one anywhere near our church who might join our church.” What they meant is, “We are in the middle of great population growth that is all of a color and a language other than our own.” Church growth is an expected, essential byproduct of a Savior who is relentlessly out on the prowl for fresh disciples. Church decline is an expected result for a church that refuses to follow a Savior who is relentlessly out to grow God's reign.

We can accept those things and people who are not like us and learn to adapt their attributes and our own to the work of God's Kingdom, or we can continue to do things the way we always have – that way that is comfortable, secure and ultimately chokes off the power of the Spirit.

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

See, I am making all things new. ...

Amen