

Making All Things New – Georgann Kurtz-Shaw

Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

When I heard about the birth of little Alyson McMahon to Jennifer and Mac on Thursday morning, I was reminded that ten years ago this school year I was pregnant with our daughter, Mathea. She was born the day after graduation in May 2000. During that long school year as my stomach swelled to gargantuan proportions, Brad and I got a little tired of people who were already parents telling us how our lives would never be the same again after our child was born. We would listen politely and agree with them, and then in private we would bemoan all the warnings. We weren't so naïve as to believe that our lives weren't going to change dramatically once we became parents. After seventeen years of marriage, we were quite settled into life on our own, and we knew that. We just got tired of being reminded how our freedom was going to disappear. Of course, what we and everyone else knew would happen, did happen. Our lives were turned upside down when we became parents, and everything was made new.

In American culture, “new” is usually equated with “better.” New shoes replace the worn out ones. New clothes are more fun to wear than those we've worn over and over for the last two decades. New bicycles shine more than rusty old bikes. Technology gets newer and better every day. New ideas take the place of those we consider outdated. We even like the smell of new cars so much that we can buy air fresheners with “new car” scent. How weird is that? As “Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger,” I don't think we want to believe that new is always better. For Brad and for me, that new expanded life we began when Mathea was born wasn't necessarily better than the first seventeen years of our life together, but it has been richer in some ways. All the changes have been worth the temporary pains that they have caused.

As our Gospel lesson (John 13:31-35) begins today, Jesus and the disciples are sharing their farewell dinner together. It's a heavy moment during the evening. Jesus has just identified Judas as the disciple who will betray him, and Judas has gone out into the dark night to begin putting his plan into action. We might guess that following that dark moment of cruel revelation Jesus would be overwhelmed with sadness. His final path to the cross has begun, and he will soon leave his friends that he loves deeply.

But instead of dwelling on the melancholy, Jesus chooses to begin preparing them for how they should live in their new life without him physically present. He reminds them of how God is going to make all things new through his sacrifice—their mutual “glorification.” As Jesus is glorified, God is glorified in him. In the Revised Standard Version that we have before us, we see a form of the word “glorify” five times in those first two sentences. The disciples might have been confused by what Jesus was saying here, but I hope that they at least noticed the repetition of this word.

Jesus then gives them what he calls a “new commandment” to tell them how they should live after he is gone. His “new commandment” is to “love one another.” The disciples must have wondered what Jesus meant when he called this a “new” commandment. After all, they probably grew up with the Jewish law instructing them to “love your neighbor as yourself.” But Jesus’ “new commandment” here goes beyond just loving their neighbors. He instructs them to love one another just as he has loved them. His love for them has been a radically “new” kind of love compared to what was asked of them in Jewish law. In his life with them and even more in his impending death, Jesus has given them and us concrete examples of how to love, and now he wants them and us to love one another in this same way. He has broadened the definition of love through his life and sacrifice. Jesus instituted a new order and a new era, an era of which each of us is also a part.

I agree with Professor Martin Marty that our Acts passage (Acts 11:1-18) for today is a “story to be leaned forward for.” We want to hear all the details. Luke even thinks this passage is important enough to include twice in Acts, first in a longer, more detailed version in chapter ten, and here condensed a bit in the passage we read a bit earlier. We know dreams included in the Bible are important, and the fact that Peter had his dream three times and that it included the voice of God reinforces that Peter and the rest of us should pay close attention to it. You know Peter’s dream and his story. As a good Jew, he had been paying close attention to his diet all his life, asking questions like: Is this beef or pork? Where did it come from? How was it slaughtered? According to Luke, Peter was so careful about what he ate that nothing “profane or unclean” had ever crossed his lips. And then he has this Technicolor vision in which God tells him that everything “unclean” he has avoided eating all his life is actually clean.

How freeing! Wouldn’t it be great if God revealed to all of us that high-fat, high-cholesterol, high-calorie, high fructose corn syrupy foods were really good for us? Think how it would change your life. I wouldn’t need to carry my reading glasses to the grocery store anymore. I can tell the difference between a cabbage and a cucumber without my glasses; I just can’t read the size 2 font that lists ingredients on most of the packaging.

Peter’s world is turned upside down; it is made new. Not only are the foods he has avoided in the past clean and all of a sudden available to him, but more importantly, the people he has been taught are unclean—those uncircumcised Gentiles—he now learns are clean as well. In this “new” world, God redefines holiness Peter is urged to eat freely and to share freely with all people. Peter goes to Caesarea with the Gentile men who have come for him, he shares the story of Jesus with all that are there, and they are saved. God reveal to Peter and to us through him that this Gospel is for us all.

As I think about these passages, I am reminded that God continues to make things new. Over time and through Jesus, God seems to have become more inclusive rather than more exclusive. I wonder if that is true of the Church. I’ve especially wondered that as I have followed the public battles in recent months over the church’s place in working for social justice. Do we need new definitions of “clean” and “holy?” Are we watchful for new ways God might challenge the

boundaries we have long thought were God-ordained? Who else is God telling us we should love and bring to our table?

In his new book, *A New Kind of Christianity*, Brian McClaren asks some tough questions about the future of the Church:

What if the Christian faith is *supposed* to exist in a variety of forms rather than just one imperial one? What if it is both more stable and more agile—more responsive to the Holy Spirit—when it exists in these many forms? And what if, instead of arguing about which form is correct and legitimate, we were to honor, appreciate, and validate one another and see ourselves as servants of one grander mission, apostles of one greater message, seekers on one ultimate quest?

McClaren argues that the church's core mission should be to "form Christlike people, people of Christlike love." This sounds like the "new commandment" Jesus gave the disciples before his death, and it seems consistent with God's new definition of holiness for Peter as well.

We are reminded today that God continues to make things new. Revelation 21 (vs. 1-6) paints a perfect picture of "a new heaven and a new earth" that is to come, a world without death, without pain. While I sat with my mother as she was dying of cancer last December, this is one of the passages in which I found comfort. Leaving life seems a lot like entering it; both can involve a lot of pain, and both move us to new worlds. Perhaps it's not surprising then that these are times for many of us when God, our "Alpha and Omega," seems the most real, the most present. As the days passed and Mom could no longer communicate with us, I knew that I was witnessing a holy act, an act of renewal. God was claiming my mother and "making all things new."

Today we have a new commandment, a new life because of Jesus' death and resurrection, a new definition of "clean," and an anticipated new heaven and new earth, and it's not even Christmas. On this fifth Sunday of Easter, we continue to be made new because of what Christ did for us four weeks ago. Easter makes all of this possible. Let us continue to live in the light of Easter and in the glory of the risen Christ as we anticipate Ascension Sunday when we celebrate Christ's final "going away."