

The Counter-Cultural Call to Love – Brian Hartley

Acts 10:44-48; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

For those of you accustomed to hearing a leader's rallying cry in the context of a sports movie, today's texts are not only bound to disappoint but are guaranteed to fly in the face of all that you have come to expect. Whether it's a classic like "The Knute Rockne Story," with the admonition to "go out and win one for the Gipper," or a more recent installment such as the preacher reading the story of David and Goliath in the locker room in "Hoosiers," American films are about competition, conquering one's adversary, and, ultimately, about winning. We Americans, by virtue of our mythic narrative, are all about rising up, throwing off the yoke of oppression, and stomping His Majesty's troops through mud and blood until we drive them into the sea. And this model is not confined to sports and military action. God help the neighborhood, the naysayers, and the nation state that dares to stand in the way of "The American Way". For they all will be confronted with the power of the huge multinationals of the ilk of Walmart, McDonald's, and Intel (the latter of which was hit, just this week, with a \$1.45 billion fine from the EU). Like the Roman general of old, whenever Americans encounter opposition, our desire is to simply claim that: "We came, we saw, we conquered."

The difficulty is that this cultural narrative is so dominant in our lives that we have dragged it into the church as our *modus operandi*. For the American church, bigger is always better—whether it is more warm butts in the pew, more money in the offering plate, or more choices when it comes to the number of different kinds of services to meet one's needs. In fact, we oftentimes speak of our mission in militaristic terms, mobilizing Christian men in sports arenas to take charge of their homes and calling the church to engage in so-called "spiritual warfare." We even idolize the heroes of Christian conquest—larger-than-life celebrities who lead impressive mega-churches and whose comely features and chic wardrobe suggest that in a world of competition where we oftentimes feel inadequate, if we simply work a little harder, pray a little longer, and associate a bit more with other successful Christian people, we, too, might yet be "winners."

The problem is that this is not the Gospel which has taken us from Lent to Easter and, very shortly, will challenge us with the message of Pentecost. In today's gospel lesson and the other texts that surround it, we come face-to-face with some of Jesus' last words to his disciples and descriptions of how they experienced the power of their mission as it came to be lived out in the early church. And the wondrous thing about this story is just how surprising it was to those who heard it, just how counter-cultural it all seemed, and just what a seismic wave it set off—one that continues to shake the world down to our very day. This is the message which confronts us this morning on the eve of the celebration of Christ's ascension on Thursday and if we miss its

revolutionary nature and force it to conform to our American eyes, we will not only have domesticated the gospel, but eviscerated it of its very power.

Our very first lesson manages to strike a note of radical inclusion in which the leaders of the church are described as being in shock. The context for this story is one of the most radical in the book of Acts—that of Peter and Cornelius. Here, all that that first generation of Christians had assumed was a part of what it meant to be the people of God, came under question. Paul's extraordinarily radical claim in Galatians that all three of the primary barriers in the ancient world (social class, ethnic identity, and gender distinction) were made meaningless in light of Christ's death and resurrection is fully on display in this story. In the Greek text, at least two discoveries should bring us up short. The first is that simple word, "astounded,"—the same word that the writer of Luke-Acts will use to describe what takes place on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. But it is also used to describe the response of those who see Jesus teaching in the Temple at the age of 12, as well as those who will hear the witness of the women coming fresh from Jesus' tomb at the end of the gospel story. It is the root of our English word, "ecstasy," which, in our day, we probably tend to associate more with drugs or bodice-ripping erotic stories than the work of the Holy Spirit!

But what is key to the text here is the absolute element of surprise to "the circumcised believers". They simply don't seem to have categories for this counter-cultural movement of the Spirit. Peter's question regarding baptism (which replaced circumcision as the mark of inclusion in the church) demonstrates just how radical a challenge this actually was. This then leads to the second "surprising" piece in the text—that these Gentiles were first baptized on Peter's orders, followed by a line we oftentimes miss: "Then they invited him to stay for several days" (10:48b). This completes the arc of the longer Cornelius' story, suggesting that all the previous barriers, the entire religious paradigm which had served God's people for centuries, was no longer operative. This story which stands at the heart of Luke's retelling of the expansion of the gospel in the book of Acts has now reached its climax: the march of the center of the movement from Jerusalem to Rome at the end of the book would simply demarcate geographically this even larger theological shift in the center of gravity. The doors of the church had been blown open with the baptism of Gentile Christians and the text will now move, in fairly quick succession, away from Peter and the Jerusalem church to Paul and the mission to the Gentiles. The earlier framework of exclusion, a cultural one, had given way to a multi-cultural vision rooted in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Jaroslav Pelikan claims, from here on out the story in Acts shifts from that of the Apostolic church to the church catholic.

About two generations after these events, the make-up of the Christian community would be quite different, even if the challenges were no less difficult. By this point, sporadic persecutions had become much more the norm and the writer of 1 John represented a part of the church living out its minority status. While his argument then may not have won the day, it has come down to us in a rather bold style, proclaiming the ultimate triumph of good over evil. This message would hold particular relevance for the church that would emerge in the second century when persecution would begin to reach a white-hot fervor. By then, Christians were to

become the spectacle of the Roman Empire and the word martyr or “witness,” was to take on a much more specific meaning.

Some of those second century church fathers, like Ignatius, the Bishop of Antioch, and Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, apparently turned to the writings of the Johannine community for strength when facing their own deaths. In passages like the one before us this morning, they probably found great hope and comfort as the writer baldly proclaims: “Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (5:5). One of my favorite narratives in early Christian literature concerns the elderly Polycarp brought before the Roman proconsul and told: “Swear by the fortune of Caesar; say, ‘Away with the atheists!’” (Atheism being the charge brought against Christians because of their unwillingness to participate in the civic cult). The proconsul pressed even further: “Take the oath, and I shall release you. Curse Christ.” And then, remembering the words of 1 John and stretching out his elderly frame, Polycarp is reported to have said: “Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” (Early Christian Fathers, 152). The 20th century theologian, Karl Barth, has written that faith is “the confidence of sinful man in the demonstration of the undeserved faithfulness of God as given in Jesus Christ, a demonstration in which he finds that his sins are forgiven.” He goes on to say that, “if there is any corresponding faithfulness of sinful man to the faithful God, it consists only in this confidence,” (Preaching Through the Christian Year, 197).

That confidence in Christ comes, according to today’s text, from a set of three witnesses—the legal number necessary in the ancient judicial system. Every time they gathered for worship, whether in individual homes or later in hidden recesses like the catacombs of Rome, they partook of the sacraments. These tactile symbols of water and wine, under the power of the Spirit, became vehicles of divine action. Though both Ignatius and Polycarp would end their lives as “losers” in the world’s eyes, they were bound inextricably together as “true believers sharing in the action by which Christ conquered the world,” (Raymond Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 599). These very ordinary elements connected these small communities of faith together as those who were “born of God” and whose only charge, according to the epistle, was to “love God and obey his commandments,” (5:2). In the face of an ignominious death, with no security in material goods and faced with an implacable cultural gap in the shape of the Roman Empire, they could yet claim, “this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith,” (5:4).

Which brings us, at long last, to Jesus’ words spoken in his last major discourse with his disciples just before his death, according to the Fourth Evangelist. Today’s passage follows immediately on the heels of last week’s reading about the vine and the branches. For those early Christians, Raymond Brown suggests, the mere mention of the vine would have immediately brought to mind for them Eucharistic union—the cup of salvation as the means of our being rooted in Christ and in the community of faith. And in these nine short verses, Jesus uses the verb, “love,” nine times, making the audacious claim that to “abide” in him and following his commands would lead his hearers ultimately into joy.

But the love spoken of here is not some sappy sentimentality associated with Hallmark cards. Approaching his own death and reaching forward a hundred years or so to witnesses like Polycarp and Ignatius, Jesus says, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends,” (15:13). Some of you may be aware of a new book that appeared just a few weeks ago by Dr. Jean Twenge, entitled, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*. Following up on her controversial book, *Generation Me*, Dr. Twenge claims that narcissism is reaching epidemic proportions in our country, leading to depression, loneliness, and mountains of debt. In such a climate, she goes on to say, messages like that of the prosperity gospel titillate our ears and become a siren song to a cultural form of navel-gazing. The result is a generation of “Me-addicts” who have been told by parents, teachers, and other significant influencers that they are outstanding individuals, no matter what their flaws. Clearly, this way of thinking stands at cultural odds with the picture that Jesus paints here of true love.

The question today is whether Christians look any different from those in our surrounding culture, not only when it comes to this question of narcissism but, more specifically, when it comes to this pressing issue of sacrificing for one another. Eugene Peterson in his recent book, *Tell it Slant*, suggests that those outside the community of faith look on while “we kill with verbs and nouns, swords and guns, ‘Christians’ marching under the banner of the cross of Christ,” and probably remark, “Look, how they vilify one another!” (Peterson, 223). The picture for those on the outside is one of hatred and spite, judgment and exclusivity. What we perceive to be “family-friendly” (a moniker plastered on many of our houses of worship), may in fact be rendered by others as incestuousness, elitism, and gross xenophobia.

Instead, then, of seeing our Eucharistic gathering as some kind of “insiders’ meal,” perhaps we need to review its meaning in light of the gospels themselves where it is but prelude to a sending forth by the Master Jesus. The Lord’s Table in the 16th and 17th centuries in England came to be “fenced off” for protection from those outside, while John Wesley made the radical proposal in the next century of opening it up as a “converting ordinance.” The table, he claimed, is not meant to be a place of exclusivity, but one of hospitality. In his book, *Let Every Soul be Jesus’ Guest: A Theology of the Open Table*, my friend, Mark Stamm, calls us to see that table through new lenses, one of which is “a culture of mission rooted in the spirituality of the Eucharist.” Within our liturgies, he suggests, we should be praying for the hungry and the homeless, the sick and the victimized. But, he goes on to say, we should also pray with our feet, “working to feed the hungry and provide a safe place for others in need,” even going so far as to “explore the political foundations of these problems and seeking political solutions to them,” (157-158). A normal result of this kind of participation would especially include a call towards reconciliation and peacemaking—even to the extent of criticizing “militarism as bad stewardship, and also as a refusal to seek reconciliation,” (158).

This prophetic voice must also, however, be joined with a culture of discerning the body, asking the question Dr. Stamm suggests: Who is missing from this gathering? In Acts, it was Gentiles who were considered outside the realm of God’s grace and who the church, surprisingly, came to understand as being a part of the larger arc of salvation. This might begin with simple

questions about the racial and demographic make-up of our community, but shouldn't end there. As Henri Nouwen taught me, we should be looking for those with special needs from whom we might learn or, as I'm beginning to think now as I contemplate entering the age of so-called "e-learning," people who are less adept with print culture and more at home with digital culture. My friend, Jim Zahniser, continues to remind us about paying attention to those struggling with mental illness and the recent advertisement in the local newspaper calling for reading tutors made me wonder about people in our college community who may struggle with the basics of reading—something I certainly take for granted.

I don't know all of those whom we have excluded from the waters of baptism and the Eucharistic table who God desires to draw to God's self. I need your help to see them because oftentimes I am simply, like Peter, too blind to recognize my own cultural and familial assumptions and presuppositions. But maybe, just maybe, if we begin to listen to one another in order to discern the Spirit at work in our midst, we will recognize that we are the ones in need of conversion, our eyes will at long last be opened, and just like Peter and his companions we will be astounded at what God wants to do in our midst.