

Resurrection Witness: Loving Family

Acts 11: 1-18 John 13: 31-35

Amoris Laetitia has been in the news. That last Latin word should be familiar, at least as that funny word in a Taize piece that we have sung before – *in lae-ti-tia*. I'm talking about Pope Francis's promulgation that in English is *The Joy of Love*, a teaching on love and family.

Folks with an agenda jumped on it in a frenzy, some decrying the Pope's liberalism, and just as many decrying his conservatism. With over 250 pages of thoughtful, measured text, the Pope is quite pastoral, acting simply as a witness to the love, compassion, and reconciliation that is at the heart of the good news of Jesus. If he managed to upset so many people, he must have done a great job.

That's one of the things about Jesus; people often like *their* version of Jesus, but bristle when it comes to those teachings of Jesus in the gospels. The Jesus who teaches about compassion and care for the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable, who reaches out to invite and welcome and even minister to those whom society has judged, condemned, and outcast – branded as sinful and sinners, who demands peacemaking and urges non-violence, and who calls for humility and personal sacrifice, all in the clarion call to love, *that* Jesus often needs to be “re-interpreted” ... out of existence.

What people really like is “church,” *their* church, just the way it is, since the church is the one that does the interpreting of Jesus and his gospel. It makes perfect sense that people gravitate to the church that most reflects their views in interpreting Jesus and his gospel. But essentially, we interpret the same texts, only some with a conservative view that gives greater weight to preserving tradition, and others with a progressive view that gives greater weight to the changing issues of society. No church is exclusively one way or another, but it's a question of the mix between tradition and change, and that mix varies considerably.

What we know for certain is that each and every church is flawed, and the churches that most insist that their way is the one and only “right” way are the **most** flawed because they can't even see the mote stuck in their own eyeball. Hard as a church may strive to reflect Jesus' vision of the Kingdom, we can be assured that it will *always* fall short.

Jesus' way is not a goal to be attained or a success to be achieved, but a vision to be lived, challenging believers to grow through faithful experience. The Kingdom is not a nation or a state or a particular set of laws or practices or politics, but an ideal whose horizon should always be beckoning. The Kingdom, too, compels us to grow and learn through faithful experience. Jesus' way challenges our conventions and customs, our traditions and favorite beliefs. When they don't, then we have lost the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This kind of challenging vision is what we find afflicting Peter in Acts 11. Our passage is the final piece of a story begun in the preceding chapter when Peter has a vision, a disturbing vision for Peter.

First we learn about a centurion in the imperial capital of Caesarea on the coast, about 30-40 miles north of Joppa where we left Peter last week after he raised a woman from the dead. The centurion is named Cornelius, described as a “devout and God-fearing.” (“God fearing” as you’ll recall is the term given to Gentiles (non-Jews) who believe in God and worship – at a distance – with Jews. Cornelius has a vision or a visitation from an angel who says: *Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter.*

The next day, Peter in Joppa has a vision while awaiting a meal. It says: *He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ But Peter said, ‘By no means, Lord; for I’ve never eaten anything profane or unclean.’ The voice said to him again, a second time, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane [or unclean].’ This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.*

As Peter is puzzling this over in his mind, the messengers from Cornelius arrive to summon him to Caesarea. Now it’s “the Spirit” who tells Peter to go.

Peter is met by a grateful and humble Cornelius, and seeing a large gathering of people, and presumably a generous pot luck, Peter explains: *You know clearly that it’s against the law for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.* Wow, Peter! That isn’t what your vision was about; you’ve expanded its meaning quite a bit. The voice said: *What God has made clean you must not call profane* (or impure or sinful), which covers food but says nothing about the people with whom you may share that food.

After Cornelius shares his story, Peter holds forth again with a remarkable interpretation going far beyond his vision: *I now realize how true it is that God shows no partiality* (or favoritism), *but accepts those in every nation who fear him and do what is right.* Where did Peter get this? Is he just making stuff up?

Let’s be clear. He is speaking about his understanding which is directly contrary to Jewish law. In the “Belief” series, we saw the strict separation of men and women in Orthodox Judaism. The strict separation of Jews and Gentiles in Peter’s time was harsher, very clear cut with no wiggle room. There was no issue of transgender students using a different bathroom; it was boys to the boys room, girls to the girls room. There was no issue of coloreds using the white restroom because separate was the way God intended it, don’t you know?

Let’s get back to what happened to Peter. Did he find himself in deep water again, stepping out in immature faith, only to make a mess of things?

I think we ought to give old Peter a break here. He certainly exceeded his vision. Yet he seems to have grasped something that Jesus was all about. Something clicked in his mind, how the Teacher would set aside the law and traditions in order to embrace those who were seeking, who sought his way and the way of faith. Jesus' way was not separation and division, but unity and reconciliation. Jesus' way was not about laws and rules and traditions, but about love and compassion and justice. It wasn't about religion and legalisms; it was about faith and love. It wasn't about a special people or nation; it was about the Kingdom and a loving Creator of all. **Peter got it.**

Not just Peter got it. Cornelius and the Gentiles of the Holy Spirit and were baptized, crossing yet another boundary that had never been negotiated before. Who said Gentiles could be baptized, Peter? Peter reply that the Holy Spirit made that transition quite plain. If these God-fearing Gentiles are committing their path to faith in Jesus, well, of course they should be baptized! Again, Peter got it, this time without a vision or an angel. He's on a roll!

After all of that, we finally get to our passage, chapter 11, which has Peter traveling from Caesarea on the coast back to Jerusalem in order to run this news by the rest of the apostles. While some other details are added, the same basic story line is repeated yet again in chapter 11.

The apostles have heard about the interactions with the Gentiles before Peter arrives. Word has gotten out and Peter's antagonists are waiting. Peter is immediately challenged by "the circumcised." We have to assume that since all Jesus followers at this point were Jews in Jerusalem, then all of the Jesus followers were literally circumcised. Here "the circumcised" identifies a certain party or group among the believers who have or would make an issue out of circumcision among new believers, holding the traditions of Judaism quite closely.

The circumcised are the traditionalists and they complain: *You went in among uncircumcised men and ate with them.* Peter then tells the circumcised and the apostles and other believers the whole story from beginning to end. He concludes: *If then God gave them the same gift [of the Holy Spirit] that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could oppose God?*

The response from the apostles and the other believers reveals an end to the objections; they're silenced, and probably stunned, too. They praise God, declaring, *So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.* Again, I find I'm quite let down by the translation in the pew Bible. The phrase "repentance unto life" is rather wimpy, if you ask me. The Greek word *metanoia* means conversion or spiritual transformation. It seems much more powerful to say: *God has granted even the Gentiles transformation unto life.*

We have gotten a front row seat in witnessing change in the earliest church, and even though they were newly formed, they struggled with change. This would not end the issue of how to relate to non-Jews or Gentiles. The issue would plague Peter and

Paul and the rest of the church for decades. In fact, the final separation of the Jesus people into a separate faith won't come until the year 75 when the Jewish Council at Jamnia issues a *Benediction Against the Heresies*, the heresy in question being the Jesus people who were officially cast out. The church would always struggle with its identity, with its understanding of the gospel.

In the reading from John which I'll cover briefly, we join Jesus and his disciples on the night of the last supper, when Jesus washed his disciples' feet to model for them the true nature of servant ministry.

After all of these things, Jesus gives his remaining disciples a new command, "Love one another." He suggests that they recall his ministry and model him again; "As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this, all will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Jesus expects his imminent arrest and likely execution. When he departs, Jesus does not want the window to God's kingdom to be shuttered as his disciples revert to what's easy, safe, and comfortable. He wants his disciples to be known for one thing above all: loving one another. Jesus' vacated place will be filled when love is present among them. Where love is, the window to the promise of the Lord and the Kingdom of God is wide open.

Peter does a great job in our story in Acts of keeping the window open and being a witness to the resurrection, to the new life that is promised in Jesus. He does this because the echo resounds of Jesus' instruction to love, to love one another and to love the unloved as well as the beloved.

The love that Jesus calls his disciples to give witness is the love that is found ideally in family. Let me repeat, I said "ideally." It is the kind of love that Pope Francis encourages all people to offer in witness to the Lord and to our new life in him.

Jesus summons us to the ideals of God who formed us, that we should be one family under one God, a loving family. God never intended different people to be separated by language, by boundary, by walls, by tribe, by social status, by race, by ethnicity, by religion, by gender, or any other contrivance of separation, exclusion, and division that we can sinfully invent. We're more concerned with having people conform to acceptable standards, in other words "*our* standards," than we are with embracing the differences as Peter did. The result: that which makes us unique and special, those characteristics of God, instead gets cited with judgment and contempt, and treated as a problem rather than a gift.

The challenge remains for our resurrection witness to see our sisters and brothers in a new way, with new life before us. May we yet realize that we're created and the promise abides to be one loving family of God's loving creation.