

## **Living what Jesus teaches**

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I find the pairing of our passages from Acts and John interesting. Here's why. The Tidewater Tellers, the biblical storytelling group that I am a member of, has been asked to present some stories for the worship at this year's LARCUM coming up in June. LARCUM is an ecumenical group of Christians seeking to further Christian unity in our area.

The Rev. Mike Ferguson from Holy Apostles asked me if the Tidewater Tellers which, by the way is an ecumenical group, would tackle the task of telling the story of ecumenism and asked what scriptures we might select. What a concept, finding the justification for Christians agreeing to work together in the bible. And guess which two passages we picked? We will be telling the earlier version of the story of Peter's vision and meeting with Cornelius and his family and will also do the full passage from John that this week's gospel is just the end. The full passage is the gospel for Maundy Thursday and includes the foot-washing story, but the operative part for inclusion are these final few verses that end our gospel today.

What we have in Acts is nothing less than the first church fight and guess what it is about. Who is in and who is out. The church in Jerusalem is livid with Peter for eating with those Gentiles. And not only eating with them, he is eating food that is not kosher. It seems their memory is just a little short because I do remember Jesus eating with "those" people fairly frequently. The disciples seem to have already forgotten the command of Jesus at the last supper and the definition of how people would know they are his disciples.

In our Gospel we have that last commandment that Jesus gave his disciples. In fact Maundy Thursday gets its name from this mandate or in Latin mandatum. This isn't something Jesus merely suggested. It is the final commandment that Jesus gave the disciples. In a rare moment of clarity for John he skips the metaphor and ambiguity and simply says, "I have a new commandment for you, love one another."

Then he ups the standard. He finishes off the statement by saying, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another." John rarely is this crystal clear. However the disciples seem to have decided that Jesus meant love for one another as in just our group. However one only has to look at the parable of the Good Samaritan to realize this command goes far beyond the in group.

Under all the discussion in the early church that we are seeing in Acts is the basic question, did someone have to become Jewish in order to follow Jesus. This is a critical crossroads for the early church. I mean just how hard would evangelism be if every man who wants to join the church has to be circumcised. We think it's tough now to get people to join but this is a real show stopper. Seriously this is an important question and part of what we mean when we say All are welcome.

*All are welcome* needs to be more than just something we post on our signs and our website. At vestry we discussed the fact that our welcome statement on the website needs some work because it is not really clear about what we mean when we say all are welcome. Over the years that welcome has often had silent qualifiers. At one time that welcome did not include people of color unless they were in their own parish. Bruton Parish was the first to integrate in Southern Virginia in the 1950s. Then we had the issue of how women were "welcomed" in the church. They could not serve on vestry until the 60s and were first ordained in the 1976. By the way Jo Taylor our interim in 2006-7 was one of the first to enter seminary after that ban was lifted in our diocese. All of these caused great turmoil and the women's issue is not yet resolved in most of the Anglican Communion. Think about all the issues this has caused and you begin to understand just how upset the disciples were back in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

So back to our welcome statement and why it needs some attention. I know many LGBT people who have read a welcoming statement like ours and visited a church only to find out that yes they are welcome, but they have to change who they are to be accepted. In other words, you are welcome to join and once you are a member we can "fix" or "cure" you. Don't believe me? Just ask almost any LGBT person.

There are different ways to welcome people into a parish. Many parishes are happy to have new folks join as long as they become just like everyone else in the parish. This is sort of like Star Trek and the Borg collective mindset. You will be assimilated, you will become just like us. Stephanie Spellers whom I met while in Massachusetts and is now on the staff of the national church wrote a book entitled Radical Welcome. A church that practices Radical Welcome is one that embraces the new person and says, yes join us and enrich us with your presence and your gifts just as you are. A church that practices radical welcome allows the new blood to help the church grow and evolve. I believe this is critical to the church today if we are to have a future.

You see what this is all about is a dramatic shift that is happening in the church. That is a shift from Orthodoxy to Orthopraxy. Orthodoxy focuses on correct beliefs and is wrapped up in Creeds and dogma. Orthopraxy focuses on how you live your faith. What do you do with your faith? Jesus never asked us to worship him but to follow him. He also did not say, people will know you are my disciples

if you believe the right things. In fact twice in the full John passage he talks about doing rather than believing

This difference between orthodoxy, right beliefs and orthopraxy right practice is at the heart of the image problem Christianity has in today's world. Several years ago an Alban Institute poll of people aged 16-29 showed that almost 90% of that group viewed religion as judgmental and hypocritical. 70% said religion was out of touch with reality and insensitive to others. They are seeing the disconnect between what we say we believe and how we practice those beliefs. I fear that is even more true today than a couple of years ago.

In the series we watched on Sunday nights during Lent, Diane Butler Bass said that in the past belief came first and then belonging. You adopted the right beliefs and then you were allowed to belong. Churches that are successful today are ones where people feel accepted, allowed to belong first and then the belief part is formed. This is a total reversal from the past and I have seen this in those of you who have joined us recently. Look at how many people were confirmed a couple weeks ago. There were far more adults than youth. That should tell us something about who we are and who we are attracting to our parish. I firmly believe this is because we are moving towards becoming a parish that welcomes all in the radical way that Stephanie Spellers wrote about.

Is this somewhat uncomfortable at times? Well yes, because it involves change. Everyone wants change but few of us want to change. I opened a presentation to the Seton Board with a cartoon that showed a search committee around a table. The caption said, "We are hoping you'll lead us on a journey of transformation without requiring any real changes."

Fortunately for all of us, Peter was able to persuade the early church that they needed to start taking down barriers to keep the other out. That Jesus' command to love one another extended way beyond the small early church and extended out to the whole world.

Our very first core value<sup>1</sup> is that "**WE ARE WELCOMING** With God's help, we accept all whom God has created, respecting the dignity of every human being and loving our neighbors as ourselves." This is never easy but it is our hope for the future and what Jesus asks us to do.

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<sup>1</sup> The core values come from our Vision and Mission Statements. They can be found at our website: <http://www.aidanvbva.net/Aidan'svisionteam.html>