

ETC., ETC., ETC.
Christ The Redeemer Church
May 2, 2010
Fifth Sunday of Easter
San Marcos, Texas
Karl Brown

Acts 11:1-18
Revelation 21:1-6

Psalm 148
John 13:31-35

Perhaps you have heard an old zoo story about the gorilla and the panther. The main attraction, the gorilla, had become too ill for the show. For fear that attendance would drop off, the staff convinced one of the employees to suit up as a gorilla and appear on stage. On the first day, the substitute gorilla just sat quietly in his cage. After a while the crowd gathered around the cage started booing. So he got up and tried to act more like a gorilla: beating his chest, showing his teeth and swinging from a limb. He noticed that the more vigorous and active he was, the more applause he received. While he was on a roll, he went over to the panther cage and shook it so hard that the door separating them swung open. You could've heard a pin drop. As the panther moved from his cage into the gorilla arena, the gorilla began to slowly back away. But the panther kept coming toward him, finally cornering him on a tree limb near the top of the cage. Then the panther open his mouth and was about to bite, when the gorilla screamed, "**HELP!**" Then the panther whispered, "shut up you fool or both of us will be fired."

Now I know it's a stretch, but in a way the gorilla/panther story inadvertently illustrates the point of my sermon and as well as the scripture reading: **ETC: Expand the Circle** (open the door to outsiders). Also I was inspired by the musical titled, "The King and I," remembering Yul Brynner's famous line as the King of Siam: "etcetera, etcetera, etcetera."

"How can you leave me with that woman?" That was my question when I was five years old after my parents told me that I would be under the care of Aunt Hattie (no blood kin of mine) for about a week while they were out of town. You see, Aunt Hattie was a middle-aged, single woman who was known in Mason for her huge size, her boisterous personality, her colorful language, her bawdy sense of humor, and for her small restaurant, Aunt Hattie's Café, just off of the town square. Some of the members of my father's church were very critical, keeping her at arms length in most social settings. In fact, I overheard some negative comments about my parents' lack of judgment in this decision. In spite of my pleadings, I was dropped off at her tiny

cracker-box house for what seemed like would be an eternity.

Little did I know what I was in for. When I was told that it was time for bed, I headed nervously and quickly to the guest room, only to find that I couldn't turn the knob. It had been greased. She couldn't keep from laughing out loud. With her help, I got into the bedroom only to find that I couldn't turn the sheets down. She had short-sheeted my bed. Again there was much laughter. As she was tucking me in for the night, she told me how happy she was to have me stay for a few days and that we were going to have a lot of fun. The next morning she let me pick my breakfast from the café menu and prepared a nice lunch for school. Beneath that tough super-sized exterior was a playful, generous, and loving soul. My parents had some other childcare alternatives, but I can now see that they were helping me to expand the circle (ETC.), pushing me out of my comfort zone. The next time my parents announced that they were leaving town, I put in an early request to stay with Aunt Hattie. More about this later.

Many years ago I had two rabbis speak to my World Religions class about Judaism. One was from the Orthodox tradition, the other was from the Reform. During the discussion period I asked, "besides the Exodus, which event was the most significant in forming Judaism?" The Reformed rabbi said that it was the Exile, for we were forced to deal with the Babylonian and Persian cultures. Not only was our faith deepened, but we were enriched by these "outsiders." When we returned to our homeland and rebuilt the Temple, we were a better people and nation. Our ancestors recognized this positive interaction by giving Cyrus of Persia, a Zoroastrian, the title of Messiah.

The Orthodox rabbi had a different answer. He said that the Babylonian Captivity had contaminated the Jews in Exile, finding it hard to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. For him, it was under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah who built a wall around Jerusalem and encouraged the Israelites to rid themselves of foreign influences. There was a return to a Temple centered religion that prohibited intermarriage with Gentiles, requiring that Jews had to be Jews by birth. The same religion, but two very different perspectives.

When we come to the teachings of Jesus, we find numerous examples of his wanting us to expand the circle. He made a Samaritan the hero of his parable and dared to call him GOOD, even though his people were considered “outsiders.” Isn’t it interesting that those who saw themselves as “insiders” (priests and levites), were actually “outsiders” when it came to being a good neighbor.

In our scripture reading this morning, we find a story that was so important to the early Christian community that it was told three times in the Acts. The first story is in Acts 10, the conversion of a Roman centurion named Cornelius. Peter has a vision THREE times of something like a large sheet descending to earth, containing clean and unclean animals with this instruction: “kill and eat.” (Hunters like this verse) And then Peter says to Cornelius, “ God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean” and “God does not show favoritism, but accepts men of every nation who fear him and do what is right.” The Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit just as much as the Jews.

As we turn to Acts 11 we have a *de je vous* experience all over again. We already know about Peter’s vision about the large sheet coming down from heaven, containing four-footed reptiles, beasts, and the birds of prey-all forbidden as food for the faithful Jews. We have already heard the voice from above saying, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” What changes here is the confrontation with the leaders in Jerusalem who were convinced that to be a Christian, you had to first become a Jew, which included circumcision and keeping the dietary laws. Again, the word ETC, expand the circle large enough to include the Gentiles without requiring all of the red tape of Judaism.

In Acts 15, this inclusive message is again alluded to when Peter reminded the assembly in Jerusalem, that Barnabas and Paul had interpreted the will of God correctly: expand the circle to the Gentiles. “And God, who knows, the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.”

I can't help but remember a close friend of mine who ran an unusual restaurant in Austin for many years. It was a gathering place for politicians of both parties, for musicians of all sorts, and for people from all social classes and ages. Attending his funeral last year was the most diverse group of people I've ever seen in one place. First United Methodist of Austin was packed. Danny's motto, inscribed on his T-shirt, was: "Love 'em all, let God sort them out." Not a bad paraphrase of Peter's message.

Now it may be hard for us in the 21st century to understand how dietary laws and circumcision was such a big deal for 1st century Christians. However, we do have our own version of food flashpoints: "vegetarian and vegan are joined by pescetarian, pollotarian, flexitarian and raw foodist. Meanwhile we pay attention to labels such as fair trade, organic, free roaming and the slippery 'natural'. A certain amount of self-righteousness comes with these choices. To be more precise, communities today often form around food specialties that are premised on the exclusion of others who fail to meet the moral standard." (Sarah H. Wilson, *Christian Century*, 4/20/2010). Recently I heard someone place an order at Starbucks: "I want a grande, skinny vanilla lotte without whipped cream." Suddenly the dramatics of the Pharisees is neither so peculiar or so past.

But the larger point is not so much about external observances as about enlarging the tent to accommodate people with different histories and perspectives. Edwin Markam's famous poem that may be found on a plaque at San Jose State University said it this way, "He drew a circle that shut me out – heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. But love and I had the wit to win: we drew a circle that took him in." ETC is clearly a biblical imperative. What is not so clear is how to implement this same requirement from Jesus in John 13 to simply "love one another." We are a divided nation when it comes to dealing with illegal immigrants, diversity in sexual orientation, definitions of marriage, political parties, health care reform, religious beliefs, economic policies, environmental protection, the rights of women, military defense, Muslims, etc. What is missing in our polarized rhetoric is that word from the one seated on the throne (Rev. 21), "See, I am making all things new...I am the Alpha and the Omega." Are we really open to the

newness that God is seeking to bring into the world, a world in which the sea (the wall that separates us) is no more?

Robert Frost in his poem “Mending Wall” wrote that “...there is something in life that does not love a wall...that wants it down.” Then he continues, “before I built a wall I’d ask to know what I was walling in or walling out.” This was the question that the Soviets had to live with for over thirty years. It is a question that the Roman Catholic Church has to live with as it struggles with the role of women, child abuse, and its relationship to the rest of the world. Is the Roman Catholic Church acting in good faith when it practices closed communion? (Some non-Catholics break the barrier and take communion anyway). It is also the question the Islamic community is discussing as it relates to the West. And it is our question that we are facing as we try to find a way of securing our borders while treating immigrants, legal and illegal, as children of God.

There is little mention in the Press of the Golden Age of Islam, a period from the 8th century through the 13th. Muslims made significant contributions to our world civilization which included: universities, hospitals, algebra, paper, preservation of Greek culture, the scientific method, philosophy, art, literature, innovations in medicine, trade and industry, etc. As hard as it may be in this age of terrorism and extremism, surely we must be open to the work of the Spirit of God among those from this religion who are trying to reclaim that which is noble in their past. There is much that we can do on our part to make it happen. But realistically we must keep in mind that the cobra will bite you whether you call it cobra or Mr. cobra.

Now back to Aunt Hattie. After a couple of more years of hosting me, she decided that she wanted to adopt a boy about my age. In the 1940s, it was nearly impossible for a middle-aged divorcee to adopt a child. However, there was a red-headed, freckled-face, five year old in an orphanage in San Antonio that no one wanted to adopt because of his family’s troubled history. My parents became her advocate and succeeded in having Bobby placed in her home in Mason. I’ll have to admit that I had to adjust to not being the only child in Aunt Hattie’s life, but in time this guy became my

best friend. Bobby went on to star in athletics and graduated from college in San Angelo. He became a hospital administrator and raised a loving family. Two “losers” by society’s standard became “winners” through their loving support of each other.

Along the way I have become absolutely convinced that the most powerful force in the world is the transforming power of love. I have discovered that to the extent that I can love the stranger and pray for my enemies, the more I can love my friends, my family, and myself...for God is love.

There is an old rabbinic tale that goes something like this. A rabbi who was a mentor to two novices asked them this question: “tell me at what point does the dawn appear?” The youngest rabbi replied, “it is when there is enough light to distinguish a white thread from a black one.” “No” said the mentor. The other rabbi answered, “it’s when there is enough light in the morning to tell the difference between a sheep and a goat.” “That’s not it,” said the Mentor. “Well then, when do we know that it has dawned?” (Apparently it hadn’t dawned on them yet). The old rabbi answered, “it is when there is enough light in you, that when you look into the face of any human being (Native Americans would include the animal kingdom), you can see that they are your brother or sister. Until then, darkness resides.”

Listen to the Psalmist (148) as he expands the circle to include all of creation. “Praise him, sun and moon; praise him all you shining stars!Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, storm wind fulfilling his command! Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds! Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! Young men and women alike, old and young together! Let them praise the name of the Lord....”

Now that’s the circle that God is expanding. We have a choice: to be obstacles or partners as God is “making all things new.”