

What's New?

April 28, 2013

Shepherd's Grace Church

³¹When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' ³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13: 31-35) (also read Acts 11: 1-18, Rev. 21: 1-6)

The other day there was a frog who came into the bank down the street. The teller behind the counter, her name was Patty Wack, thought it was somewhat unusual for a frog to come into the bank. The frog, undaunted, came up to her counter. Patty Wack asked in a rather incredulous tone, "Is there something I can do for you?" The frog answered boldly, "I am a little behind on my bills. I need a loan!" Patty asked, "What is your name sir? Do you have an account with us?" The frog replied, "My name is Frog Jagger. I do have an account here." Patty responded with another question saying, "How much do you think you need to borrow?" The frog replied in a very matter of fact voice, "\$30,000." Patty said, "I am afraid that for that amount you will need some collateral!" The frog, becoming a bit annoyed at the seemingly endless questions said, "That's no problem." He then pulled a little ceramic elephant from his pocket. He said to Patty, "I am sure you will need to talk to the president of the bank. Just show him this as collateral and I am sure everything will be fine." Patty, thinking to herself that the president would laugh at the request took the ceramic elephant from the frog, walked into the president's office and said, "There is a frog at my window requesting a loan for \$30,000. He has an account here and he is only offering this tiny ceramic elephant as collateral. I don't even know what this thing is." The president of the bank came around from his desk and examined the object Patty Wack brought to him, smiled and said knowingly, "It's a knick-knack Patty Wack, give the frog a loan! His old man's a rolling stone!"

I don't know about you, but if I really saw a frog walk into the bank I do business in, I would want to share that observation with others. It would be extraordinary information! No doubt it would be a topic of conversation for weeks, perhaps months to come. That would be news! What other event could possibly top that? I can't answer that question for you, but I would like to offer a thought. We are now 4 Sundays after Easter. We are 4 Fridays after Good Friday! We are only one month removed from remembering the greatest events in human history and already the significance of these events seems to be fading from our memory. Christ died to redeem our lives. Christ rose to restore our lives. This morning, in our own casual and conversational way we have returned to the world. Instead of greeting one another with an exclamatory, "Christ is Risen," we are back to our traditional, "What's new!"

What's New? It is a common greeting among friends isn't it? We ask without thinking and we expect a response as equally mindless! What's new you say? Your friend says, "Oh, nothin' really." You both

continue on from there with pleasantries and other equally mundane topics. When the conversation ends there has been no discovery, no information shared, no clue revealed about how the other person really feels or thinks, or is experiencing life! Certainly there is no revelation about the frog that came into the bank. Certainly there is no revelation about the risen Jesus!

A few days ago, I witnessed a meeting between two people at a birthday party. "What's new?" the first one asked. The other said, "Oh nothing." Then the conversation went on from there. The first person said, "I had a physical examination from my doctor last week." The second said, "Oh really? What did the doctor say?" The first person said, "He said I was in great shape for a 90 year old!" The second person said, "Good for you!" The first person said, "Not really. I'm only 68!"

I am sure you know I didn't really witness this conversation. If I had, I am sure the second person would have been dutifully embarrassed at his or her lack of attention to the words of the first, but I tell you the story to illustrate that we don't often pay attention to what others are saying, or perhaps and even more appalling, we don't want to really know the answer to the question, "What's new."

If we had to listen to the truth of that answer it might just overwhelm us. "What's new?" Since Easter our nation has been attacked by terrorists, a small town has been devastated by an accidental explosion and the loss of life has been horrifying, an earthquake has shaken Schezwan Province in China, friends have passed away and Jeff Hodges has won the pie eating contest at the second annual Shepherd's Grace pie baking contest. These are just a few of the things I know that are new.

What's new? Peter was confronted by that question when he returned from Joppa to Jerusalem. Joppa is just a few miles down the road but it is in a region populated by gentiles. There Peter has a vision of many unclean foods coming down from heaven. He is instructed to eat but he refuses. Again he is instructed and finally he is reminded that there is nothing God has created that is unclean! Everything that is made is made magnificently and with a purpose. From this vision, Peter begins to understand that the conversation does not just pertain to things. If all things are clean, all people are also clean.

What's new? Peter understands anew that all people have received God's grace! Armed with this new understanding, he meets and baptizes gentiles. Horror of Horrors, he does this without the approval of the other apostles or the council of leaders and as he returns to Jerusalem this indignant group of leaders of "the way" ask him the question not in a conversational way, but now in a threatening way. So Peter, "What's new," they ask already knowing, already offended!

How might Peter respond? How might he set their fears at ease? How might he get at what he has learned; what is really new and at the same time restore the relationship he has jeopardized with the others? The answer lies in a gift I believe we have lost as a society! The answer lies in a suspension of political correctness and in a genuine desire to communicate what is new. There is a risk involved. Peter might not be successful in overcoming his friends anger. He might further alienate them and cause a break in the ministry they are all called to. If you were Peter would you take the risk?

Most of us today do not take that risk. Most of us today gloss over the offense and pretend that our role in it was no big deal. Most of us do not push to try to clarify our position or listen to understand the

position of the other person. Instead, we pretend that the difference we have is not a great issue and we cover up our true feelings in order to avoid conflict. That is why we don't really want to know what is new! That is why we don't really want to investigate the frog that approaches the bank teller. That is why we don't really want to listen to the rest of the story our friend might have to tell us as he or she comes from the doctor's office. We do not want to take the risk. We do not want to get involved.

Peter, however did not avoid the conversation. He shared his vision from God and he risked everything in his response. I believe he did this for the sake of the gospel which he knew all the apostles loved so deeply. I believe he did this knowing that he could completely communicate his reasons. I believe his confidence in the gospel itself was the precise reason Peter proceeded as he did! I believe his willingness to take the risk is exactly where we meet our gospel lesson this morning.

Peter was there that night as the disciples were all gathered for the last meal they would share with Jesus. He was offended that Jesus, the greatest person he had ever known, would want to wash his feet. He struggled to understand how this great man could humble himself to perform such a menial task. When he confronted Jesus about it, Jesus did not back away from the conversation. He answered pointedly and purposefully saying, "Now you do not understand, but later you will know." He said this just a few verses ahead of the passage we read this morning. His willingness to meet Peter's concern head on allowed Peter to experience something that was both profound and unsettling to him.

Peter witnessed that Jesus performed this act for all who were present. He also remembered that it was not until after Jesus had washed all the disciple's feet that He told them one of them would betray him. From this Peter learned that the love Jesus had extended not only to those who supported Him and did what He wanted, but to those who believed differently from Him and went a different way.

As we think about the passage for our study this morning, this lesson should be kept at the front of our minds. It is easy to love those who think and act similarly to us. It is much more difficult to love the one who decides not to think like we do. Peter still has much to learn as he prepares for his conversation with the apostles regarding "What's new," however this lesson number one is fundamental to his preparation for the conversation. This is the profound.

The unsettling comes as Peter remembers the sequence of events that took place that night. Jesus washed the disciples feet, announced the betrayal, then "After he had gone out," Jesus said Now! "Now the son of man has been glorified!" The one who went out was Judas, the betrayer, however Jesus did not come into His glory until Judas had gone out! What is to be learned from this sequence?

The obvious is that Jesus washed even the feet of Judas, but the less obvious is that it wasn't until Judas went out that Jesus could be glorified. Before Judas went out Jesus could still have assumed control of this life's situation. He could have still let his own will be done and not that of God the Father. By allowing Judas to leave Jesus assures his betrayal, but also assures his obedience to God! What Peter learned, what we all must learn from Jesus is that it is God's will that must be accomplished above all else. There is no glory in accomplishing our own will but only in doing the will of the Father! That will was spelled out completely in John 6: 37-40. The will of God is to redeem all that is created!

By letting Judas leave, it becomes possible for Jesus to be glorified and for God to be glorified in him because of their willingness to obey and sacrifice. Obedience is made clear in Jesus' actions. He could have altered the outcome of the world's events had he chosen to restrain Judas, but instead He obeys God. Only by giving completely of Himself could God's plan be accomplished. God's plan required one who was without blemish, the Lamb of God, to take on the sin of the world so that God might pass over the world in judgment and find the world worthy of God's presence not because of anything we have done but by everything done by Jesus on our behalf.

Sacrifice is realized as we recognize that God, sparing not even His only Son, loved the world so much that He offered the one who knew no sin in place of a broken and sinful world! John 3: 16 tells us that this is how much God loves us! As Peter was present on Good Friday he recognized this great love. In light of his own actions prior to the crucifixion he found this gift greatly unsettling! You see, just a few verses after the passage we have to study this morning comes the prediction that Peter would deny Jesus three times that very night!

Recognizing his own shortcomings, Peter continues to be unsettled by God's great gift of love. When he hears that someone has moved Jesus' body on Easter Sunday morning, he races to the tomb, goes in, looks around and leaves to return to his home. It is beyond his imagination that Jesus could have overcome the grave, and yet he was there that night. He witnessed the glorification of Jesus and the great love of God!

I think Peter didn't understand what was "new" until he paid attention to the next few words out of Jesus' mouth. After Jesus announced his glorification, he said, "I am leaving you a new commandment! Love one another. This is my commandment to you. Love one another even as I have loved you." What was new was that Peter had been witness to such incredible love that he could no longer ignore it. What was new was that Peter, now confronted with a people so different from him could not withhold the gospel from them. What was new was that Peter's life had been transformed.

In the passage from Revelation this morning we hear described a "New Heaven and New Earth" where God dwells with God's people. What's new is God's presence as a constant reminder of God's great love. There is no need for tears or sorrow or sadness because God makes all things new. Everything is transformed because of what and who God is! God is Love! It is that love that now rules Peter's life!

What's new as Peter stands before the Gentiles in Joppa is that Peter has learned that all of creation is worthy of respect! All of creation is worthy of redemption and that the work Jesus did on the cross is not just for the Jews, but for all; not just for people but for each and every aspect of all God created so long ago and placed in the garden.

Peter could no longer ignore the need of those who were different from him. He describes for the disciples the vision he had of every kind of unclean thing he ever been taught about. In the vision he is commanded to take, eat! In the vision he is called to remember the words of Jesus as He offers himself. Take, eat, this is a part of me. In the vision he is taught that all of creation is a part of God and none of it is unclean. All is worthy of God's grace and love. Imagine the apostles as Peter first began to explain his vision to them. The people whom Peter was describing would have been so foreign to them that it

would have been incomprehensible to think of loving them. They would have been vile, disgusting, UNCLEAN!

In the 21st century we have not progressed very far from the thinking of the apostles. We don't have to look very far to find examples of what it means to be criticized for being different. If you want to advocate for gun control the most common way to make your point is to point to those who advocate their second amendment rights and call them "Gun toten' red-necks." If you want to advocate for second amendment rights you simply point to a gun regulation advocate and call them a bleeding heart liberal and remind them that guns don't kill people, people kill people. The argument degenerates into mindless name calling and finger pointing and no one is encouraged to listen to the other person. There can only be one right answer and it must be mine! If you don't agree with me, there can be no middle ground.

This argument applies not only to guns, but to immigration, debt, gay rights, and anyone of a number of different issues we could name that divide us. When the apostles questioned Peter asking him, "What's new" they wanted to apply the same thinking to their situation. They wanted to point fingers at those who were different from them or thought differently from them or believed differently from them and shout that those people have no place in the "Kingdom of God!"

As Peter laid out his vision for them, he invited them to imagine all that was at stake. All that was unclean offered such a great opportunity for expanding the work of God that it became irresistible. Everything in God's created world was necessary for the fullest success of God's mission. There could be nothing missing or nothing would be complete. God could not live in a place that was less than complete so it only made sense that in the "New Jerusalem" everything would be present and complete and none of it would be incomplete. Peace in the Hebrew is "Shalom" or said differently, Peace is where nothing is missing and nothing is broken.

The apostles did not share that vision at first. When Peter reminded them of that night when they sat with Jesus, when he washed all their feet, even the feet of the betrayer and the denier, leaving no one out they started to remember. All were included, all were invited, all were intended to "Love one another!"

What Jesus wanted them to know, what Jesus wants us to know is that we do not love one another because we are all the same. That is easy! On the night of that last supper, Jesus did not just offer his love and sacrifice to those who were the same as Him. To do that would have been impossible. There was no one in that room who was worthy of having Him wash their feet. Jesus shared with all, equally. He was not glorified until he allowed all to make their choice, even the ones who chose to betray him!

What Jesus wants us to know in his new commandment is that we are to love those who are different from us. What 's new is that we can now know that or differences are our greatest strength! We have always known this in the United States. We are a nation of differences, founded on principles that will allow our differences to add to and not take away from what we believe we can become! "We hold these truths to be self evident; that All Men are created equal (later amended to include all people,

black as well as white, slave as well as free, male as well as female)” all are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights and those rights include life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness!

We have always been a nation that has said, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free!” We have not said, make sure they are not handicapped or crippled. We have not said make sure they look like we do. We have not said send us only the smart ones. We have included all and invited all! We have done this because we knew that in difference comes new idea, new thought, a new way of doing things!

In opening our doors, we have allowed the wonderful German foods, the Italian Music and art, the French passion, the Spanish work ethic. We have reaped the benefit of the differences we grew up with and learned from and without those differences we would not be the nation we are today. We are that nation because we have believed as Peter did that all of these received the Holy Spirit the same way we did!

Peter made his case with the apostles just as we must continue to make our case with each other. When we are asked what’s new, we must not, we cannot be so preoccupied with our own struggles that we fail to listen or speak. Instead we must say, “hey did you hear about the frog that walked into the bank and wanted a loan?” or “What did the doctor really say to you?” or “Christ is risen indeed!” We must know that because of God’s love for all of us and because of His command that we love one another we are “What’s New!” Amen!