

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Fifth Sunday of Easter
24 April 2016

Scripture readings:

Acts 11:1-18

Psalm 148

Revelation 21:1-6

John 13:31-35

Well, what do you want to deal with: the Queen's 90th birthday or Prince's death? *[laughter]* We could do both.

One of the things you may or may not know about the British monarch is that there is only one day in the year when she walks *toward* her subjects. One day, Maundy Thursday. And why I mention that is the text from the gospel today is talking about Jesus saying, "*I give you a new commandment.*" The word for commandment in Spanish is *mandamiento* which comes from the Latin word *mandatum*, and it's the same word from which we get the English word - if it *is* an English word - Maundy Thursday. It's the Thursday of the New Commandment which is the Thursday in Holy Week, the Thursday before Easter, because it recalls this text, this summing up of the life of Jesus, and if you had to put into one sentence what Jesus was all about, there it is. "*Love one another as I have loved you.*" Well, that's simple, isn't it? Until you give it to church people. *[laughter]* And not just Christians, but faithful people of all different stripes have difficulty believing that that's our job.

In the first lesson today, does it strike you as even perverse that anybody would have to know who was circumcised before you could speak to them? Who checks? *[laughter]* And this is religious behavior. What you eat, how you mutilate your body, what you wear, with whom you associate - all of that stuff is related to the religious business of keeping oneself clean and pure, in the right company and pleasing and acceptable to an angry God who is wasting her time being mad at people who can't make God happy anyway. But religious behavior invites us down these rosy paths of thinking that to be religious is to be better than somebody else, to have a special relationship with the Almighty that nobody else has but us, to know all of the rules, and not only to know them but to invest all of the time, energy, effort and cost of obeying them.

And Peter gets challenged this morning - by probably the writer of Luke who wrote Acts according to scholars - gets challenged as to why he would talk to the wrong kinds of people. They weren't religious. Then Peter relates this extraordinary dream that coming down from heaven is a large sheet of cloth that contains the fruits of the earth. How many of you have eaten reptiles? I have. Crocodile, alligator, rattlesnake. The point being that all of the religious effort in the Church of Jesus' day was focused on what you should and shouldn't do in terms of dress, diet, *et cetera, et cetera, et cetera*, as religious activities to please God - all of which is based on the presumption that God can be pleased by what we do. Now what kind of deficient God do you have who's that mad all the time? What kind of deficient God do you have if you think that there's something you can do to make God happy? The service of God in religious ideas is often the business of making God happy at the expense and cost of the happiness of other people, certainly at their expense when we say to them, "*You are not as good as I because...*" And then you hand them your book of religious rules. I do it with Methodists all the time. *[laughter]* "*We use wine!*" "*The Bible says...*" We're engaged in this all the time. It's not just those people 2,000 years ago. This is a criticism of who and how we are as religious people generally and by nature.

This isn't the only text we have today, but it does contain one of the most extraordinary pieces of information I think we'll ever get. In Acts it says, "*The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.*" When so much of religious effort until this time and until this day is the business of making a distinction between them and us, the direction *here* comes from the Spirit. "*The Spirit told me to go with them.*" God says, "*These, too, are my children. These, too, are people whom I've created. These,*

too, are people I love. These, too, might even be religious people who do it differently. They might even do it better!"

I grew up with the stories. This one wasn't allowed to go into that one's church. The people who lived next to Aunt Gertrude when I was a kid had come out from the Hungarian Revolution about 1953. They were brought having lost everything they owned to pick peas for a frozen food concern. I think it was Birdseye. There was a way for them to work off their plane fare and so forth. It was a great deal when they could move into an \$8,000 row home next to my grandmother who greeted them in Pennsylvania Dutch which was highly appreciated because their language was German. It wasn't the same but it was close enough, and it wasn't English so it worked. An extraordinary family whose example remains to me today - very faithful church-goers, all of them. A family that not only escaped tragedy but experienced tragedy here - car accident, kids dead, all this stuff. They worked hard - very, very hard - and were grateful for the working opportunities here. And on Sunday morning Mrs. Fischel and her daughters went to the Cathedral. Mr. Fischel went to the Lutheran Church on the East Side. They fought communism, they struggled, they lost everything, they worked together, they copulated, they had children, they ate together, and Sunday morning came and they went different ways.

Now you can give me all the reasons you want and I just can't believe that that has anything to do with not making a distinction between them and us. We all understand that there's politics and histories and all the rest of it behind that, but boys and girls, this is the 21st century and, by the way, we have a pope who gets it now, whom we can now safely say is *our* pope! Try that one on for size. Because we agree with this concept of a God who's not angry but loving and a God who - unlike the Queen - a God who 365 days a year moves toward her subjects with something better than the Queen has to offer. You know what the Queen does on Maundy Thursday? She gives what is called *Maundy Money*, coins that are minted just for that occasion. There are beautiful little kidskin pouches - red and white ones - and there are as many pouches for men and as many pouches for women as the monarch is years old. So this year she'll be handing out 180 bags of fake money. Whoopee!

Well, I like the pope's example better. On Maundy Thursday he washes and kisses the feet of people - no longer just the Cardinals. I'm somewhat disappointed in some of the news reports that have gone "Whoopee" about the families that have come home to Rome on the papal plane. But, friends, these are examples that are offered to us to follow. And there's one that's older and way more emphatic and way more realistic than any of those examples, and that's the one we get in the gospel today when Jesus... My heart breaks when I hear, "*At the last supper when Judas had gone out.*" I really do like Judas. But it's at that meal where Jesus stoops to wash the feet of his disciples and big-mouth Peter says, "*Oh no! You're not going to do that to me.*" By the time we write scripture Peter knows that Jesus is God because the Church taught him that and he also probably knows that he's going to be the Bishop of Rome. Anyway, Peter says, "*You're not going to do that to me. I'm pretty good but you're better than I am.*" And Jesus says, "*If I don't, you're up a creek.*" And he says, "*Well, do my head, too, and the rest. Wash me.*"

Maybe it's good that the first sentence is there because Judas' only problem, as far as I'm concerned, is that he didn't get that he couldn't save himself. Remember when we read the reports of Judas we're always told that he did what he did to fulfill the scriptures. So what was his choice? But the point of the example of Judas that is most important for me is that he was honest. He didn't do anything that the others didn't do. They all turned their back. They all betrayed the Lord. They didn't accept money perhaps, but he tried to give the money back. He also tried to apologize. I don't hear that much from the other eleven. But here is this extraordinary attempt to apologize, to make up for, to pay back, to correct and as long as he feels that that is his job, that his salvation depends upon him, what he does, the money he's accepted inappropriately, the things that he's done inappropriately. As long as he feels that it's his job to work his own forgiveness, he has no hope and so he goes

and hangs himself.

Judas just didn't hang around long enough to believe that the message that Jesus brought was a real one, that we have a God who not only walks toward her subjects but crawls and not just one day a year, one day in Holy Week, but every day, every blessed hour and second of the year. We have a God who is constantly engaged in the business of stooping to us and - this is an idea I had a long time ago which I treasure - a God who prays to me way more than I pray to God. We have a kind of God who comes to us begging, pleading, asking, beseeching, loving, serving, bathing our feet and asking us to believe that God is greater than we are and that God's intention for us is to eat from the sheet, to enjoy all of creation, to be happy because God makes us in the image and likeness of herself and God *is* happy.

Do you see how messed up it gets when you need an angry God? Jesus believed in a God who truly loved what God created - you and me in our imperfections, in our temporality, in our limitedness, in the middle of our mistakes and grief and addiction and humanity and gender and age and decrepitude and youth and childhood and dotage. Wherever we are we have a God who is constantly praying to us to believe that we are loved sufficiently, that we don't have to pay our own bill, that we are sufficiently loved to do what it is we were created to do which is the simplest thing in the world - believe that you're loved and share it. That's what the gospel says today. *"I give you a new commandment," un mandamiento nuevo* in Spanish, a new Maundy, *"that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."*

Have you ever considered the Twelve - how unlovable they were? A bunch of foul-mouthed smelly fisher people, tax collectors and crooks, a quack doctor among them possibly. But he loved them and they loved him. And he said it doesn't matter what you eat. It matters whether or not you believe the spirit of God descends upon you and tells you what is said to you in baptism and every day of your life: *"You are my beloved child with whom I am well pleased. I'm not angry."* And if we're made in the image and likeness of God we won't be either. Whether or not you believe Jesus was God, certainly his example was godly. And where do we find Jesus in this text? On his knees washing the feet of those closest to him who are not particularly lovable but who had dirty feet. That was the only qualification - cruddy feet that needed cleaning, and he was the one to do it. Did they deserve it? Probably not. I don't think any one of them deserved it any more than Judas. And I think you're in for a surprise if you think differently because I'm sure when you get to heaven - if, of course, you do [laughter] Where the hell else would you go? One of the first people you will encounter will be Judas as living eternal proof that God's love was big enough even for him. If it's not that big, we're in trouble because you know how we lie to ourselves about our own goodness.

This is gospel, friends. This is good news. This is about a living, loving, delightful God who is happy with us and who loves us beyond our inadequacies so that we might be empowered to love others - period. That's all there is to religion. It relieves us of the need to make distinctions between them and us, and it invites us to believe that all of them are us and we are they - children of a heavenly Father. I know that there's a gender problem there, but that's quoting an old Swedish hymn that I know from childhood. Do you know it?

*Children of the heavenly Father
safely in his bosom gather;
nestling bird nor star in heaven
such a refuge e'er was given.*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.