

EASTER V – 2022

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Amen.

This is the day we have our Annual Parish Meeting, and I would like you to recognize that it is in a long line of church meetings, going back to the first century and the days of the apostles as they formed what we have come to call the Church, and decided many things about Christian life in community. Oh, we shall have our share of statistics today, the record of membership, of our personal giving, of the way we have spent God's money in the past year. But those are really the minor indications of what the Holy Spirit has been doing among us.

Let's start with today's reading from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. This is among the first meetings the early church held, and it was called together because of a controversy. The biggest problem in the earliest years was deciding what practices from Judaism were to be continued and observed among Christians. These controversies might never have arisen if the Word, that is, the life, witness, ministry and mission of Jesus had only been spread among Jews, both those practicing and those who had lapsed in their faith, as described in the phrase "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." At one time, the prophet Isaiah was told by God in a vision, "It is too light a thing for you to go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel; I will send you out to the nations." What a terrifying challenge for Isaiah! Yet God sent him out.

That was a hard message to learn. I think virtually all of Isaiah's successors, up to and including John the Baptist, thought of themselves primarily as sent to both the gathered sheep and the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Some were as successful as Jonah, and converted many, so there were in just about every place where Jews lived

members of their community who had been Gentiles at an earlier time in their lives.

This is a lesson even Jesus had to learn, and I think that is something the Church throughout history has underplayed or undervalued. One day, Jesus met a foreign woman whose daughter was sick and dying. He refused her request to heal her daughter, saying, "I can't throw the children's bread to the dogs." The woman wasn't even offended. Like many Black people in our culture, she was used to the prejudices of the majority culture, and here was one more prejudiced Jew telling her she could not have the healing her daughter needed. Many women would have given up and gone away, but this woman had tenacity, and she was brave. She looked at this Jewish healer and said to him, "Yes, but even the crumbs under the table are good enough for the dogs."

This is one of the most important stories we have about Jesus. It shows how even he thought of his mission from God in narrow terms—serving the people of his own culture and spiritual tradition. But this is neither a vision nor a dream like Peter's, where he is told to ignore the dietary laws of Judaism. This is an encounter with someone who is less than fully human in Jewish eyes, and Jesus has to learn his biggest lesson about mission and ministry from her. When she says, "Even the crumbs are good enough for the dogs," Jesus sees that she has more faith than most of the his own people he is talking with every day. This woman is a believer in the healing power of God, and he decides then and there that her daughter should receive this grace and be healed. And she is!

From that day on Jesus is changed. He talks about foreigners with approval. It is hard for us to imagine how offensive it must have been to his fellow Jews to hear him talk about a "*good Samaritan*." How could a lowly Samaritan be "good?"

We have all heard similar prejudices in our day, but if we take Jesus' experience and witness seriously, we must admit he is telling us: "Get over it!" From that day on Jesus often tells stories which reveal the faithfulness of someone who is not part of the Jewish culture.

The apostles continued to learn from Jesus as they looked back to the time when he walked among them. In today's story, Peter has been summoned to an early council of the young church, a church that was still trying to figure out what was central to the faith and what was peripheral. In Judaism, the dietary laws were there to keep people from damning themselves by eating something that was considered more than dirty, even profane. It seems that had not yet come up as an issue among them; they just went on with the practices they already knew. The same with circumcision and rules about worship, funerals and burials, etc. Several must have thought, "Who does Peter think he is that he can ignore the rules and relate to people who are unclean?" Peter tells them the story of what moved him to think in an entirely different way, a dream that came to him three times, telling him, essentially, that he needed to discern what God wanted, what God intended, and not what had been codified into rules by the ancestors. Was this a change of God's mind? Or might it be that in the past the only way they could hold onto any picture of God was if God were theirs alone—loving no one but them. And, of course, there had to be a reason for God to love them and they believed that was all about how well they obeyed the laws. It was Jesus who had showed them, when they looked back on his days with them, when they remembered what he had said, that God's love was not because of something they did; God's love was and is a free gift, and all we have to do is open our hearts to receive it.

When Peter is called on the carpet by the Church's early leaders in whatever kind of a council they gathered, he had to explain himself and his actions. "My dream," he tells them, "called me to look at things differently, and then, just as I woke up, these three men came to ask me to go to Caesarea with them. The Spirit told me to go and not to see them as different from us." He goes on with the story of how he saw their faith and understood that this was God's doing and something he had better not oppose. In the last sentence in this passage, it is clear the early Church took Peter seriously and said, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

From then on, they heard of converts preaching elsewhere, and when they checked them out, they found that they were speaking in the Spirit, that same Spirit they heard among themselves. This was both a revelation and a revolution, and that has been what the Spirit has been doing within and with the Church ever since.

I believe the Holy Spirit has been working constantly among us at St. Matthias in the almost two years we have been together. When I came, there was a lot of tension among those of you who were here then, so much so, that some of you left for awhile because it made it too hard for you to pray.

There are some here who want to attribute the change to me and my ministry here, and I want to disclaim that I did it, yet recognize that I was a part of this, but perhaps not in the way you think.

When I came, I was enough of a smart aleck to remind you that I did not cause any of your problems. I also said that I did not come to solve or fix your problems, but to *walk with you* through a time of naming them, confessing them and letting go of them.

I have had the privilege of walking with many people through times of significant crisis and tensions. I call it a privilege because the experiences have taught me much about God's actions and God's power to bring healing and grace.

What is true in every community in tension is that the antagonisms have become so embedded that the expectation is that there is no way to get beyond them; it will always be this way.

At this point in my life, I now know better than that. I have experienced resurrection enough times, both personally and in communities, that I know there is a way forward that comes with healing and grace. So, as I lived here among you, I knew that part of my work was to keep reminding you that God longed for something new and better among you, and that God could help you come to that new place. Another part of my work was to hold up hope as the way to move forward—hope, because hope is open-ended, whereas expectation always has something in it of our solutions to the problem, and when we hold onto our solutions, the change is always too small to make a real difference in our lives. The third part of my work was to invite the central figures to come together and begin to work through the differences—by talking about the pain, the frustration, the fear, and not ignoring it, and always with a willingness to move beyond—*somehow!* That “somehow” is where the Holy Spirit comes in.

These people met. They experienced pain. There was some suspicion and a lot of doubt and a tremendous amount of tension, and I noticed very clearly how much a certain four-legged pal of mine was very sensitive in going to some of those bound up in tension and just sitting beside them, until he felt them relaxing a bit.

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The truth-telling, the honest longing for something better, the learning how to let go of expectations, the help of our friend Cathy Koerpel with the lovingkindness and wisdom she brought, all worked together to bring healing—even though not all at once. When the stories went out that the meeting had been truly helpful, a new hope arose, and that has been getting stronger ever since. Perhaps the best weathervane to describe the winds of the Spirit is the testimony of those who have come back to us and found a new spirit here. Add to that the people who have come to us as new friends and found enough health here to want to be a part of St. Matthias.

In today's gospel passage, we go back to the Last Supper and some of Jesus' last words to his dearly beloved friends. He's not warning them about evil lurking in the dark; he's not giving them a lot of rules to live by or die from; he's not even laying out a bold plan of action for the mission of the early Church. Jesus simply says this: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

On one hand it is so simple, and yet we all know how much work it takes—because we are always having to admit the ways we get in the way and then let go of them, so the way is clear for the Spirit to act.

This is truly a time to say, "Alleluia! Christ is risen!"

"Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!" Amen.

+JLJ