

Text: Acts 11: 1-18; John 13: 31-35

Title: The Changing face of Love

Date: May 2, 2010

I am always amazed (when I stop and think about it) about the things we take for granted. Not the little stuff- like I assume that my socks will match- but the big stuff; the life changing stuff. For instance, we routinely refer to the Old Testament and the New Testament. I doubt if anyone of us really thinks about it what the difference may be. For us it is merely a name. For most practical purposes we could use the words orange or blue, as in “today’s reading comes from the book of Orange....” I suppose if we thought about it we would hone in on the words “old and new”. Old comes before new right? it doesn’t even occur to us that the operative word is testament. Just what do we mean by testament anyway?

Testament comes from the Latin, *testari*- meaning to witness. OK that makes sense. If I ever get sworn in at court I will give testimony. With my luck it won’t be half as exciting as the Law & Order episodes on TV. Come to think of it, my life isn’t as exciting as the episodes on Law & Order, and that is a good thing. When I saw Old Testament, I am bearing witness to a particular experience of God; when I talk about the New Testament I am bearing witness to a essentially different experience of God. Since we know that God does not change, and that His fundamental attitude towards us is love, then what we are talking about is our experience of God’s Love.

In the Old Testament, the experience of God’s love was one of **particularity**. God’s chose for himself a people. Again, this mirrors our experience of human love. Love is about calling someone into a particular relationship. Of all of the parents in the world, of all the parents I might have had -I had mine and they love me best. Of all the wives in the world, of all the wives I might have had, I have mine and she loves me best. Of all the children in the world, of all the kids I might have had, I have mine and I love them best. Taking that train of thought to its logical conclusion, we can understand what an incredibly powerful statement, “I will be your God and you will be my people” must have been to the people Israel. Enough to build an entire infrastructure to buttress that experience of particularity. It’s not like God doesn’t love other people, but He loves us best.

So in order to preserve that particular relationship we will live separately from other people, we will eat different food; we will establish stricter codes of cleanliness and purity. And the one thing we will not do is water down the differences. Because if we become just like all the people around us, we will no longer be a particular people and maybe God won't love us anyway? Did you see what we just did? We went from celebrating our particular relationship with God to thinking that what God likes is those things that make us particular. And since we have bought into the notion God like those things that make us different- in order to maintain that relationship I have with God I must avoid being contaminated by the people around me. This may not be logical, but it sure is human. And it goes a long way to explain why Jesus had to come to begin with, because it's hard to leave our insecurities behind and not to project those insecurities onto God.

Out Acts passage is about the breakdown of this kind of thinking. Back in chapter 10 we are introduced to Cornelius, the commander of the Roman Cohort- he was the commanding officer of about 800 men, a believer in God, a giver to charities, and all around good guy. He has a vision in which Angels tell him to send to Joppa (outside modern Tel Aviv) for Peter. At the same time Peter is having a vision that he is supposed to go to a guy named Cornelius. He goes, preaches the Gospel of Jesus- that one can experience God's forgiveness- and experiences something new. God still loves us- that doesn't change, but now that love is contingent on God's actions towards us and not on our particularity.

What Peter experiences is the joy of sharing the news of God's love with those he previously considered outside the pale of particularity. This is the New Witness of God's Love: no longer concerned about particularity, God's people are called to share God's love with the people around them.

Like so many things new, we resist. We hate change. Peter get grief from the those same guys who were there when Jesus told them "Love each other as I loved you." Somehow it never occurred to them that Jesus was always extending God's love to someone outside the pale: lepers, sinners and tax collectors. And that they were supposed to do the same. So Peter recounts the vision again- that what God has declared clean is clean, no matter what their prejudices were. As if to underscore that is

going to be normative for the Christian church, Cornelius and all of his household received the Holy Spirit in the same way that they did.

This doesn't settle the debate- the tension between wanting to stay within a Jewish (particular) expression of the faith is going to fly in the face of guys like Paul, who correctly see that the radical nature of the Gospel compels us to share the experience of God's love with those who have not experienced it yet. Peter and Paul's side eventually wins, but the temptation to stay with an exclusive, particular understanding of God's love is always there.

I suppose it might help if we put it in these terms. Particularity inevitably leads to ritualism, the notion that God only recognizes a particular form or worship. When one realizes that all worship is the opportunity for individuals to express love and thanksgiving to God, then all the discussion about the "right" way to worship seems just silly. This came to my attention last week when Lifeway Christian Resources released their study that claimed that 72% of young adults surveyed said that they were more spiritual than religious and that this bode bad news for the church. I know that many of you caught this, because many of you emailed or called me about it. The cynical side of me says, "Well that's one way of getting your name out there..." but most of me just shakes my head and wonders if I was the only one who experienced the 70s.

For those of you younger than me, back in the early 70s there was a wholesale revolt of the Baby boomers against the institutional church. Denominations were seen as the establishment and therefore not to be trusted. The tired litanies and liturgies were seen as obscuring the good news of the Gospel. New music, influenced by what then passed for rock and roll was making its way into the church. New forms of worship-styles that stressed the relational aspects of the Gospel were developing- they were called Body Life services on the West Coast- services that sought to reflect our experience of the Body of Christ. Sound familiar? Everyone was saying that it was the end of the church as we know it. Didn't happen.

Lets fast forward 40 years: current numbers- 41% of Millennials, those born between 1988, to now say that they pray daily. 42% of Gen Xers, those born between 1965-1980 said they prayed daily in the late 90s. 54% of Gen Xers say they pray daily now. 47% of Boomers, those born between 1946- 1964 said they prayed daily in the

early 80s. 62% of them say they pray every day now. You know the old saying that the more things change the more they stay the same? Then, as now, if the choice is between going to church because you are supposed to and gathering with other Christians to bear witness to and to share God's love- going to church doesn't stand a chance. Good thing we don't do that.

What we bear witness to, what we testify to is that coming here is all about taking the opportunity to say thank you to God and to share God's love. Today we baptized little Liam Ryan. It's all about sharing God's love with him. We bear witness that God has called him to a particular relationship- that Liam is His and God loves him. as the same time we get to share God's love with him, a experience that brings us closer together. I suppose that it is a good thing that we are also celebration communion together. For that too is our bearing witness to Christ's love, and his promise to return.

Let us pray