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Lectionary: Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98 (UMH 818); John 15:9-17

“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you,” if we could only remember one piece of the Bible, for me the reading in John would be a good place to start. This is not the first time we have heard this command but the Gospel reading today takes us to the heart of Christian discipleship: Love for others as God has loved us. John interprets the meaning of Jesus’ death on the cross as his loving sacrifice of himself for us in obedience to God’s loving will and purpose, not only for himself but the whole world. The emphasis on friendship in this passage has considerable significance. The Christian way of life exists only in effective human relationships. Every human institution works best when relationships are firmly based on mutual respect and values, at the root of which is love. The love that expresses itself as a selfless example is the fruit that Jesus expected his friendship with the disciples to yield. It began with his love for them and their love for each other. We who believe are called to make a similar witness in our time and place.

We are called out with this reading: we are chosen, we must respond, we have work to do. This is not a duty, like that of a work relationship but an opportunity; a moment to experience Christ in the joy of responding in love. The theme of this passage concentrates on self-sacrificing love, the unique focus and life force of every Christian.

Our relationship with the Lord is defined, we are not merely servants taking orders, but friends who are empowered to care and respond. Some when they hear the mention of being friends, sense some lower level of responsibility as if being friends is not much work and does not take much responsibility. But being a true friend is work, it means taking the time to

care, to be sensitive, to respond and be involved in a relationship. And we all know that relationships that work well take work. The Gospel message defines the difference between the relationship of a master and servant versus a relationship between friends. Jesus chooses his disciples for a different path, one that is bent on creating God's way in the world and bearing enduring fruit. He trains his disciples in the will and ways of "the Father" (verse 15). His training course is participation in God's mission with him, with Christ always leading the way.

Well as you have heard we have all been chosen. Jesus tells the disciples that they did not choose him but that Jesus chose the disciples, and then he appointed them to go and bear much fruit. We are being called to invite, make, and nurture disciples of Jesus Christ.

I can't help but think of the many people we have from this congregation involved in the Walk to Emmaus being held this weekend out on Lake Travis. Our Pastors Rip and Laura are clergy serving on the team along with lay members from our church as well. All are serving so they can help illustrate God's Grace in the lives of the participants who have come to learn. People from around the world have been praying for the team and the women participants for days. It is hard to imagine a more encompassing example of making and nurturing disciples as God has loved us. All that are there were chosen by God out of love.

When we practice these selfless acts of love, we have the opportunity to become Christ to those we encounter.

In the passage from Acts, Peter was chosen and he responded, he was appointed to bear fruit, lasting fruit. He did not question the gentiles

experiencing the Holy Spirit as he says later in chapter 11 of Acts. He talks about remembering the Lord saying “‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ So if God gave them the same gift as us, who was I to think that I should oppose God?”

First it was the Samaritans, then last week we heard of the Ethiopian who wanted to understand more, he believed and then was baptized in a pool of water that they passed by on the roadside, and now we see Baptism being extended to the Gentiles. What you do not hear in the reading is how Peter came to be in this place. He was in the home of Cornelius, a Roman Army officer, a Gentile. Cornelius actively sought God, he revered him, he was generous with other people and he prayed. God told Cornelius to send for Peter. When Peter entered Cornelius’s home, he broke a whole list of Jewish rules but with an eager and attentive audience he could not hold back his message from them. When the people were filled with the Holy Spirit Peter knew he had to baptize them and welcome them as brothers and sisters in the growing Christian church. The Gospel was and is for everyone. Peter shows us that the walls like those that existed between gentile and Jew meant little in the face of the message of love offered by Jesus Christ. This was the next step of taking the Gospel to the whole world.

The Holy Spirit makes the way clean for us before we can see the way is possible or even see the importance of going down the path. Peter was faced with baptizing the Gentiles who were not part of the original plan as the disciples saw it. Christians at the time were a sect of Judaism and Gentiles fell outside of that equation. But Peter saw the gentiles were also overcome by the Holy Spirit so the Christian family expanded and grew beyond the

originally conceived boundaries. In this moment Peter was responsive and open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and God's commandment to bear fruit; he expands the circle and increases the Christian family. That circle has continued to grow and includes us now, here, in this place. When we experience the joy of being in relationship with Christ we cannot keep that joy only to ourselves. "Love each other as I have loved you."

How can we be like Peter expanding the opportunity for relationship with Christ beyond previously established boundaries? How can we bear fruit that will last in response to the love that we have been shown?

When I first considered this passage in Acts I first thought of it in the smaller more local context like how we handle the growth of our programs and ministries in the local church. Do we limit program or church growth because we fear change or do we embrace new ideas because we seek ways to expand our work and include new disciples of Jesus Christ? Are we mindful of the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our work day to day? Are we able to think outside the box when faced with opportunities that seem guided by the Holy Spirit?

In March of last year the Barnabas Connection received word that the faithful administrator of the financial assistance fund of the Wimberley Ministerial alliance who worked at Cypress Creek Church was getting married and moving out of state. She had administered the fund for several years, basically since the creation of the Barnabas Connection in 2004. The administrator was responsible for managing the funds donated by participating Wimberley congregations and then distributing it to families

and people in need in Wimberley to help pay rent, utility and medical bills as outlined in the guidelines established by the Ministerial Alliance. So the question was who was going to take it over? Cypress Creek Church was definitely ready to pass it on to another local congregation since they had managed it for close to 4 years. In time the question came to rest at the door of the Barnabas Connection, would we take it over?

I used to think of that day as the day when they asked who would step forward and everyone but me took a step backwards.

You know, it is funny how sometimes it can feel like the Holy Spirit is taking you by the hand and dragging you down a path like a wayward child, as if you do not have any choice. But we certainly do, we can go and grow or we can choose not too. In this situation an opportunity was pointing us in a direction that would expand the Barnabas ministry and all we had to do was trust and put one foot in front of the other and get going.

Now I wish I could say from the very beginning I recognized this as a great opportunity for the Barnabas Connection and our work, but I did not. Initially I was stuck looking at this in terms of the box that the program had been previously wrapped and I knew I couldn't wrap it the same way. At the very least the previous administrator worked full time, and I did not. I was also scared of the personal contact that was going to be required as I wrote checks to these people in need. I had seen hearts become hardened in this type of direct service and I really wanted to avoid that situation, so initially I was afraid, plain and simple.

Thankfully our Pastors Laura and Rip were both encouraging, the Barnabas Connection committee was excited, the volunteers were excited and all eagerly approved the decision. They did a good job of dragging the wayward child down the path so to speak. Looking back I can see the blessings in those decisions. We have administered the fund for the Ministerial Alliance for a little over a year now, and it has grown our program and our work extensively. No, we have not done the work in the same way as the previous administrator, but we have made it work for us, and I think over the last year we have improved the service provided in many ways too. We have been able to raise even more awareness of the needs that exist here in Wimberley with the participating congregations. We have a firm grasp of the programs available to help people in Hays County and therefore know when writing a check isn't always the best solution. Yes, there are times we have to be tough and practice a little tough love or prioritize needs, but that is ok and so far I do not feel myself becoming immune or hardened to the needs of our community. There are times of course when we cannot help due to minimal resources or no resources at all to address some situations. Those occasions call us to a different level of work, trying to fill a gap or thinking of an advocacy piece to help address the overall situation beyond the immediate need. At the very least we are there to listen. This last year of being in charge of the Ministerial Alliance fund has flown by and in some respects I cannot imagine it not being a part of the Barnabas Connection program.

Now remember those questions I asked earlier? Do we limit church growth because we fear change or do we embrace new ideas because we seek ways to expand our work and include new disciples of Jesus Christ? Are we

mindful of the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our work day to day? Are we able to think outside the box when faced with opportunities that seem guided by the Holy Spirit? As I worked on this sermon and considered these questions and Peter's decision to respond to the Spirit, I came to realize that we clearly have to consider the larger implications of this passage in relation to the worldwide church and not just here in our home town, looking at our local work.

When thinking of the bigger context, the worldwide church, the question that kept knocking on my door from this passage in Acts was, who are we now not allowing to be part of the Christian circle? Who are we not loving as we have been loved? Now remember the gentiles were not originally conceived of as partners or beneficiaries of the message, they were unclean according to Jewish law. Each of you may have ideas of people who occur to you, but the following knocked me over as I studied these readings more and more in preparation for talking to you today.

The contrast for me is stark in that the United Methodist church believes that even death row inmates can be saved by Christ. That those who our society considers the worst of the worst are not beyond God's redeeming love and therefore should not perish as a means of punishment. I am proud of our United Methodist church for being able to recognize the value of all of God's people in this instance and in many others.

And yet, we have good brothers and sisters who have been raised in the church, serve the church, want to be part of the church but still are not fully welcome at the table and fight for full inclusion in our church simply because they are gay. The United Methodist church struggles with this issue and is not of one mind.

How can we look at this challenge through Peter's eyes? I see such strong similarities to the situation then with Cornelius, a gentile, and the situation

we face now with our Gay and Lesbian brothers and sisters. I ask that you pray for all the people on all sides of this painful issue, realizing that all are trying to be faithful. God will lead the way.

What would our ministries and the worldwide church be like if we simply followed Peter and said “Amen” when we saw what God was doing? It is our faithfulness to the needs of the church and our mission of responding to Christ’s call that we must be committed too. Sometimes we want to hold onto past traditions and avoid change. Or we stop ourselves from serving because we can’t see ourselves doing a job like we have seen previous people do it. I have realized that God is not calling us to serve like others who came before us but to serve using our gifts and strengths and as a result sometimes the end result will look differently. We should be willing to think outside of the box. Rules and definitions and structure are important and can be helpful in maintaining and continuing important work. But rules should not be used to restrict the expansion of our ministries and of our churches or in the end we allow it to limit growth and we must question whether we are being true to our mission of making and nurturing disciples of Jesus Christ. Just to clarify, I am not suggesting quantity over quality. All of this work must be grounded in real relationships based on mutual respect which is grounded in the love we received from our Creator. It is important to meld the old and the new, where we have come and where we want to go and to vision together and to be open to the leading of the spirit.

I asked Lynn to add “Sweet, Sweet Spirit” to our hymn list today, because I remember singing it many times when we worshipped each Sunday in what is now the fellowship hall, particularly during that time as we prepared for the transition to this new space. That hymn really captures the heart of this

church for me. There continues to be so much evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit here. We see it in the life of this loving and committed Church family, the programs - Mother's Day Out, the prayer ministry, the extensive mission outreach to this community and the world. We see it in the amazing leadership of our clergy, staff, and committee members and leaders and their faithful stewardship of the work of the church. We feel the Holy Spirit in the inspiring music shared with us by multiple gifted musicians and singers, young and old, throughout the year.

We are blessed and we must celebrate and remember the many gifts we have been given. But we must not become complacent and overlook the guiding of the spirit in our work here in our community or in the work of our larger church. Go out and love as you have been loved and when the people of God see what God is doing, let them say Amen!