

Easter 5 C
Acts 11:1-18
John 13:31-35
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Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
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This morning as I prepared for the day, I listened again to the public radio program, "Speaking of Faith," which is on at 6 a.m., but which you can hear on their website, www.speakingoffaith.org. The guest today was Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, speaking on "The God of Surprises." I commend that program to you. The bishop began the interview with part of a prayer that is familiar to many of you, which I thought appropriate to use today as well. *Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit, and they shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth.*

There are some in the church who have suggested renaming the Book of Acts—its full name is "The Acts of the Apostles," and some would change it to read, "The Acts of the Holy Spirit." We are still in Eastertide, the season of resurrection, the season that leads up to Pentecost, when we celebrate the giving of the Spirit to the Church. But the Spirit's already here, too. And in the book of Acts, so much of what the apostles do seems almost despite themselves, over and over compelled by a power that is not their own, the power of the love of God. Throughout this book we see transformation, change, upheaval, and violent shifts in perspective and purpose.

Today we see that power doing its work on the Jewish notion of what was kosher to eat and what was not. It's easy from the Christian perspective to judge all of that kosher stuff as ancient claptrap. We must be clear, though, that the dietary

restrictions handed down in the Law were not just religious legalism, created just for the sake of having hoops for people to jump. The rules were part of the way the people of Israel knew who they were in a world that had been very hostile to them. They had been occupied by one power or another for a very long time, and they'd had to maintain a place of strength for themselves as a community. Their rules about who ate what with whom were not frivolous. They were part of what helped the people survive and stay faithful.

So the church folks back in Jerusalem, back in Jesus' land, didn't take kindly to the talk they were hearing from the hinterlands about all sorts of riffraff being admitted to the fold. They at this point still held that sure, Gentiles could become Christians, but they needed to a) be circumcised if they were male, and b) eat the right foods in the right way, associating with other people who did the same. Jesus was a Jew, so what kind of Jesus follower can you be if you're not also a Jew?

Today's reading from Acts is a confrontation for them, the introduction of a different reality, a different structure or formula for faithfulness. And it was not because they were Jews that Peter and the Jerusalem Christians had a hard time accepting it; it was because they were humans. We're all more alike in that characteristic than we might seem. Change like that is hard. But hard things are exactly what God seems to call us to, pretty regularly.

Some of you know that I spent last weekend at the Lockhart Prison Unit with the Kairos ministry. Kairos is something like an Emmaus retreat weekend, only in prison. A team of about 30 of us met with 42 women prisoners, sharing the grace of God with

them through talks and singing and lots and lots of food. The food, of course, was for many the high point, and actually it's what got many of them in the door. The food at the Lockhart Unit is awful, really, and over the course of the weekend these inmates nearly inhaled everything from raw broccoli and strawberries to brisket and pizza and lots and lots of cookies, all prepared by the outside team.

When you're new to a Kairos team, you don't know exactly what to expect. All of the team had attended the state criminal justice training; we had all learned that inmates are very smart and crafty and manipulative and that we would need to defend ourselves through appropriate boundaries. At the same time, most team members did also expect to be as moved by the experience as the prisoners would be; they did go expecting to be receivers and not just givers. And somewhere in the back of our minds was that scripture text where Jesus said that when we visit prisoners and minister to them, we minister to him.

Armed with all of that knowledge, which at points felt self-contradictory, we presented ourselves at the Lockhart prison. Once we had moved through the admittance process, which included being discreetly patted down and taking our shoes off, showing the guard the soles of our feet, we waited to travel through one locked door after another. We arrived at a room that had been a gym but then had been converted to a manufacturing space for a project that never materialized. The large space was divided into three smaller "rooms" by blue plastic tarps, hung by plastic cable ties, threaded through grommets, strung up on metal scaffolding. One room served as a chapel, with rows of chairs facing a podium on a table covered with a lace tablecloth

and set with a floral arrangement. The fresh flowers were an unexpected pop of beauty and life in such a dreary place. Another of the rooms was where we ate meals, and the third was called the community room.

In the community room there were eight tables, each seating 3 team members and 6 inmates. That's where we slowly got to know each other. Even just among the six at my table, there was a huge variety—one a former college party girl convicted by the feds of printing counterfeit money; one who committed armed robbery while high on drugs, even though she knows now she heard the voice of God that night, telling her to turn around and go home; one, a mother of eight, who was horribly abused by her husband in her own home for years, who now prays without ceasing but promises to fight any man who starts to hurt a woman; one who didn't share much but who became more and more of a cheerleader for others as the weekend progressed; a smart, inquisitive tomboy who read books as fast as she could get them and could have been the girl next door; and one who showed herself to be a powerful preacher of the word of God the moment she opened her mouth.

The beauty and diversity and depth of these women was overwhelming, and one of the first truths that entered my consciousness was that we all make mistakes, and very often we make those mistakes in search of the love and healing our hearts yearn for—it's just that we look in the wrong places, and we let our wills run away with us, and we let voices woo us other than the true voice of Love. That's not to gloss over people's crimes; these women all understood what they had done and the consequences of their actions. Some of them carried great guilt about the people they

had hurt, and they cried from gratitude over family members and friends who had stuck with them. They just hoped most of all to be able to take a better crack at a decent life the next time around.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say I was stunned by my oneness with these women. Obviously there were a lot of differences between us, many of them drug-related. Serious drug addicts will do just about anything to lay their hands on their next hit, but when they get clean, it turns out that they're just people. People with a problem, maybe a problem that has a good shot of snagging them again as soon as they walk out of prison, but still just people. If we're honest, we all know our own mistakes, different in scope and nature from those committed by prisoners, yet choices we make against the love of God. We do it all the time—we hurt ourselves, and we hurt others, even if in small ways, and we ignore or run roughshod over what God is seeking to do in us and with us. That was one thing that unified all of us in that prison gym. And the other thing we shared in common was our basic yearning for love, even in the face of our own resistance to it, the yearning for God that God placed inside of each of us.

Who knew? I figured this experience would be powerful, but I had no idea I would end up loving these women. The moment that slammed it home was after we had all gathered in the chapel, and the inmates were called back into the community room. They didn't know it, but they were going to find there tokens of love from the team members, letters we all had written to them, letters that would be the only ones they would receive in prison that hadn't already been opened and read by the guards.

We team members stayed behind the blue tarp wall and listened, first to the rustling of 42 paper sacks as they were opened, and then to the quiet, as the women began to read. And we sat behind the tarp and sang, and sang, and sang. And as we sang, God was there, the Spirit was there, very nearly in bodily form, binding us team people from the outside to these women whom we had come to love on the inside. The Spirit hovered over us, ignoring the boundary of the blue tarp, present to us in the sound of one another, and the Spirit said as clearly as I've ever heard anything in my heart, "You belong to each other."

In the vision Peter recounts today in the passage from Acts, I doubt that the sheet he saw lowered from heaven was made of blue plastic. Yet it may have pointed at the same sort of manifestation of the Spirit that happened at Lockhart. In his case, the sheet brought him a vision of things all mixed together that weren't supposed to be. And all I can think is that the real transformation that happened in that moment was not so much that it was now OK to eat this animal and that one, when before they had been off limits. The transformation that really mattered had to have happened in the heart of Peter—the transformation of his consciousness, the moment he saw that vision and understood what it meant. The eyes of his heart, drawn up and out of himself, the Spirit bodily manifested in this strange collection of animals, telling Peter, "What used to be is no longer. What used to be was what kept you safe, kept you in the faith. But what you see now is a new thing."

The animals in the sheet pointed to the much broader reality of the introduction of Gentiles into the family of the faithful, Gentiles being people who were not Jews, not

people of the book, not circumcised, not clean in a hundred different directions, not related to Jesus in any appreciable way. The impact of that new thing God was doing, the new family God was creating—the emotional and spiritual impact of that realization on Peter, and then on the home folks, the Christians back in Jerusalem, cannot be overstated. That’s where the transformation happened—in them.

The new reality heralded by the sheet lowered from heaven, full of animals, heralded by the tarp hung from a scaffold in a prison—that new reality is the reality of Love, with a capital L. It is the new commandment, given to us by Christ, that we be a community known by our love for one another. And if you’re that kind of community inside, it has to affect how you function outside as well. The only mark that matters is the mark of the Holy Spirit, the mark of the repentance that leads to life, as Peter put it. The lines that divide us, however well intentioned, finally cannot stand against the love of God, alive in us. Out in the world, whether we’re talking about immigration law, or homosexuality, or malaria nets, or the criminal justice system, we have to be a community known by the shape of its love—boundary-breaking, mind-blowing, mistake-erasing, expectation-crushing love. We must be people who live into the future, not knowing what God is about to do, with us and through us, but stepping out in love anyway. We must be people who expect the unexpected to happen, in powerful ways, by the acts of the Holy Spirit. And so we will find ourselves shaking our heads in amazement, saying along with Peter, “Who were we that we could hinder God?”

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit, and they shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth.