

Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 15, 2022  
“Love In Action” (John 13:31-35)

A middle school music teacher had just organized a band in her school. The principal was so proud of the teacher’s efforts that, without consulting her, he decided that the band should give a concert for the entire school. The music teacher wasn’t so sure her young musicians were ready to give a concert, so she tried to talk the principal out of it, but to no avail. Just before the concert was ready to begin, as the music teacher stood on the podium, she leaned forward and whispered to her nervous students, *If you’re not sure of your part, just pretend to play.* And with that she stepped back, lifted her baton, and with a great flourish brought it down. You guessed it; nothing happened. All that came from the band was silence.

Sometimes, we in the church are like that middle school band: unsure of our parts, tentative of our roles, reluctant to sound out the faith that God desires of us. And that’s because we have trouble deciding what is most important to us. In our first lesson from Acts, Jewish Christians had trouble deciding which was more important – taking the gospel to the Gentiles or preserving their Jewish rituals and traditions.

The Apostle Peter had received a vision from God, a vision that eventually led him to Joppa to the home of a Gentile, named Cornelius. As Peter visited with Cornelius and his family, he discovered, to his amazement, that God was present in that Gentile home. Having been raised a Jew, Peter had always made a distinction between Jews and Gentiles. The Jews, he was taught, were God’s chosen people while the Gentiles fell outside that tightly knit circle. But the power of the Spirit was at work helping him see the bigger picture – that God made no distinction between these two peoples; that God shows no partiality. God’s plan is to offer salvation, not only to the Jews, but to all who would believe in him. And when Peter saw that the Spirit was with this Gentile family, he baptized the whole household. By doing so, Peter became the first missionary to the Gentiles.

But when Peter returned to Jerusalem, he was met with criticism for what he had done. The Jewish Christians (referred to her as the *circumcised*) questioned why Peter – a circumcised Jew – would eat with uncircumcised Gentiles. By doing so, he had made himself unclean because the Gentiles ate food the Jews thought unclean. But Peter defended his actions by explaining what had happened. He told them about the vision he’d had and how God had told him to go to Joppa. He told them how, when he was speaking to Cornelius, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had fallen upon the disciples at Pentecost. He then concluded that if God had given them the very same gift, then he should not hinder God. So he baptized them and they ate together.

Peter, you see, had come to a new understanding, an understanding of God’s all-inclusive love, an understanding that God shows no partiality, that the salvation offered through Jesus, the Christ, was a gift given to all who believe. Therefore the people of God – a designation always previously given to the Jews – were no long defined by their Jewish background. Ethnicity did not make them God’s people. Just as God made no distinction between rich or poor, strong or weak, God made no distinction based on one’s religious background. So God worked through Peter to redefine who the people of God are.

The people of God are those who love God and neighbor. They are characterized by their devotion to God and by their devotion to one another. What had Jesus told his disciples earlier? When asked what was the greatest commandment, Jesus said, *Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.* So the idea that *only* the Jews were God's holy people was shattered. With that, the barrier to table fellowship was also broken down. So Peter ate with them. He concluded his argument by saying that *God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.*

The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were then met with the choice to let God work in God's way – namely to include the Gentiles as part of God's people – or to continue asserting that Jewish rituals be maintained, namely that Gentiles had to become Jews before they become Christians. This was the choice before them.

You and I know that most of the choices we make in life are not between what is trivial and what is important. Rather, most of the choices we make are usually between what is important and what is more important. This morning's gospel text shows us what is most important, and that is God's love for us: God's love that forgives our sins and makes us children of God, God's love that brings us together in fellowship with one another, God's love that sends us forth to proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus, our Savior.

Jesus tells us this morning, *A new commandment I give you: that you should love one another; even as I have loved you, you should love one another.* If we're unsure of our part in Christ's church and have trouble deciding what's most important, we should take our cue from Jesus' words. Jesus tells us that most of all – first and foremost – God desires that we love one another.

We may choose to do other things in the church: tithe, teach Sunday School or lead Bible study, sing in the choir, do maintenance work, help with the outreach ministries. All of these things are of vital importance to our congregation. They are wonderful and important to our life together. But if we're unsure of why we do these things, if we do not do them out of love for God and love for one another, we miss what God desires most of us. Love in action is what Jesus is talking about: love which finds expression in kindness, courtesy, tolerance and acceptance of those around us. Jesus calls us to love one another and bring that love to light in the ways we treat those who are closest to us, those with whom we work and go to school, those who sit next to us in church, and yes, even those who are different from us.

Oh, it's easy for us to say that we love all people in general. But it's another thing altogether to put that love into action, to make love concrete in our attitudes and actions toward others. *Love one another,* Jesus says. We are a congregation of God's people – and remember the new definition of God's people: those who are devoted to God and neighbor. As a congregation of God's people, we are called to care for one another, to set aside our preconceived notions of who is and who is not acceptable to God. You and I can't make that judgment.

May I further suggest that the ground at the foot of the cross is level. That means that no one is elevated above the others. We are all alike in that we stand toe to toe as sinners. We have all fallen short of the glory of God and we all stand at the foot of the cross as beggars, begging for God's

grace, mercy and forgiveness. The Ph. D. stands alongside the mill worker. Leon Musk stands alongside the person at the homeless shelter. The senior citizen stands alongside the teenager. The black man stands alongside the white woman. The Lutheran stands alongside the Baptist. The Russian stands alongside the Ukrainian. We all stand there together.

Moreover, we are all united by an even stronger bond in that we have all been received into God's goodness by God's grace in giving is only Son. It is God's love that unites us and it is God's love that we are called to share with others – without distinction. This means that our lives are to be characterized by love in action, just as Jesus put his love in action.

In the broader context from which today's gospel comes, our Savior put his love into action by washing the disciples' feet. He washed their feet so they would understand the depth of his love for them and be motivated to wash each other's feet. And our Lord made no distinction. He washed the feet of Judas, the one who was about to betray him, as surely as he washed the feet of the others. We put our love into action when we, too, wash the feet of others. We do this by lending a helping hand, by offering an encouraging word, by providing a need that has gone unmet, by welcoming others into our fellowship.

Think of some of the ways we, as a congregation, have washed feet this year: offering food through the monthly Mobile Café, sharing soup with the Crisis Center, collecting coats for refugees, providing free dental care for many needing it, giving baby items for Caring Hearts. That's how we wash feet. That's how we love one another. It's that simple. Sharing God's love, living God's love, loving one another happens when we are connected to God's love and when we allow God's love to surround us and shape our lives into Jesus' image.

In a world way too filled with people who are concerned about themselves first, we are called to witness to something more important – God's love. We are called to witness to a love that gives itself for others, a love that cares about others, a love that makes our lives meaningful in giving to others. So, take up your instruments and play, my friends. Let the band of faithful followers strike up a tune, for the notes are laid out before us. *Love one another as I have loved you*, Jesus says. In other words, *Put your love into action*. Amen.