

The Holy Spirit and Essentials of Faith

Acts 11:1-18, John 13:31-35

May 6, 2007

I.

We just heard a Gospel reading in which Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment. He said "just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. Other translations of the Bible say "must" instead of "should," but either way it's a commandment and I don't think anyone wants to split hairs with Jesus. We know what he meant, and he didn't intend to give us a choice.

In addition, we have a New Testament reading which, according to historians, described events about fifteen years later when this commandment was put to the test. An assembly of church leaders in Jerusalem was considering splitting hairs about the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. They had to decide whether the opportunity for salvation extended to pagan Gentiles, or was limited to Jewish Christians. It raised the issue of whether the love of Christ was for everyone, or only a few.

Today I want to focus on this New Testament lesson from the Book of Acts because it is an example of John's Gospel in action. It demonstrates how the good news of salvation was intended to apply to everyone, and it confirms that only the Holy Spirit can truly lead us to know God's truth.

II.

As we review these readings and examine what they mean for us and for the church today, I would ask you to keep in mind an important distinction. It is the difference between the Gospel teachings on one hand, and the work of building the early Church on the other.

Once we finish the first four books of the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which describe the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, we get into what the New Testament tells us happened during the next sixty to seventy years. And I would suggest that for purposes of this sermon those events can fall into one of the two categories I just mentioned.

First, Paul and the apostles were teaching the Gospel, the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. That message was proclaimed as the eternal and unchanging truth without regard to whether it was popular or unpopular, and without regard to whether it was contrary to any existing beliefs or practices.

Second, those same people also were trying to build the early Christian Church as the organization through which Christians could share their faith. In this work, however, unlike the task of spreading the Gospel, Paul and the apostles were forced to deal with local practices and customs as they encountered competing factions, disorderly worship practices, and internal church battles.

This distinction characterizes church history over centuries of division and debate, beginning with the story of Peter and his vision in today's reading. Church leaders were divided then, and continue to be divided to this day.

I believe this distinction is important. We must ask whether disagreements touch the Gospel or other basic tenets of our faith, which are eternal and do not change, or whether they involve matters of church operations or local culture, which might be treated differently if they do not affect these basic truths.

III.

With that background, let's look at today's reading from Acts. It starts with Peter being accused in an assembly of church elders in Jerusalem. They charged him with baptizing pagan Gentiles and placing their salvation on equal footing with Jewish Christians. Peter then offered his defense.

He said he had been praying, and went into a trance and saw a vision. Right away a light should start to flash in our minds. Whenever someone in the Bible goes into a trance or has a vision, something big is about to happen. This was no exception.

Peter said he saw a large sheet descending from heaven filled with animals and reptiles and birds of all kinds, accompanied by a voice instructing Peter to kill and eat them. Peter, however, refused to do so in his vision because many of these animals were treated by Old Testament dietary laws as being unclean and could not be eaten. The voice in the vision, however, told Peter that anything God made was clean. This happened three times and the vision ended

Peter then said the Holy Spirit immediately led him to the home of one of these Gentiles, and the Spirit fell upon everyone in the household just as it had fallen on the apostles at Pentecost.

As a result, the message of Peter's vision and the work of the Holy Spirit in the Gentile home caused him to realize that all people, including the Gentiles, were clean, just as all animals were clean. This experience was the foundation for Peter's claim before the church elders that if God had baptized Gentiles with the Holy Spirit, then the gift of salvation also was intended to include the Gentiles. The elders agreed in what probably was the most important decision made in the early church.

Now, it's important to understand that this reading did not change any Old Testament dietary laws for the Jewish people. Many Jewish families today maintain kosher households based upon these laws. The reading merely reflects a decision of the church that dietary laws would not be used to exclude non-Jewish people from the church. In fact, it gives effect to the Old Testament prophecy that through Abraham all people of the earth will be blessed, and that Israel will be a light unto the nations.

In this way the reading invokes both parts of the distinction I explained earlier. First, it maintained the truth of the unchanging gospel message by confirming that Christ died on the cross for all people and not just a select few. Second, it shows how the church was willing to limit the scope of Old Testament practices and traditions when they came into conflict with the Gospel.

IV.

So, how does today's reading about Peter and his vision apply to us and to the church? I suppose any story about food might get our attention, at least mine. That reminds me of the husband and wife who carefully watched their diet, ate only healthy foods, and for many years were very active and seemed to have a lot of energy.

Unfortunately, however, they died together in an accident and went on to their eternal reward. When they got to heaven and saw how wonderful it was, the husband turned to wife and said, "if we had eaten what we wanted and hadn't wasted all that time figuring out our diets we could have been here five years earlier."

Some people might say that the moral of this story parallels today's reading. They might say that dietary laws or practices are not mandatory and salvation is ours whether or not we follow them. While that is true, I also would say that we must avoid the danger of using Scripture in superficial ways to serve our own lives instead of the other way around.

Yet, there are people in today's church who do exactly that. They use readings like we heard today to justify their own agendas for change. They say that if God did a new thing by not requiring Gentiles to follow Old Testament dietary laws, then God also could be doing a new thing by supporting whatever their current cause of the day might be.

There is an obvious risk here, and it is linked to the distinction I made earlier. Simply stated, the Gospel does not change, and cannot be circumvented by practices such as dietary laws. That's why today's reading extended salvation to both Gentiles and Jews. It's why the event of Jesus Christ fulfilled some Old Testament requirements and superseded others.

But some people have used this idea in today's world to claim much more. Limiting Old Testament requirements such as dietary laws has become a rationale for disregarding scriptural standards that challenge contemporary society. This can lead to accepting moral laxity or ungodly values merely because they have become part of modern society. This idea claims that the church must accept realities of the secular world if it is to be relevant, and that the more important objective is to have a faith we can live with rather than a faith to live by.

Well, it isn't that simple. On the one hand, if the church continually adapts its doctrine to accommodate the diminishing morality or declining values of society, then the church forfeits its role as a leader in society and the Word is corrupted. Allowing people who openly live in adultery to become bishops in the church is an example of that type of erosion of the basic tenets of our faith. And I could preach a separate sermon on that subject.

On the other hand, constructive changes can be made when things that once were required for specific reasons related to church order or cultural traditions at an earlier time have later become unnecessary when those reasons or traditions no longer exist. Ordaining women as priests and bishops is an example of that type of constructive change. Again, I could preach a separate sermon on that.

So the question is, how do we tell the difference? The answer is that we, like Peter in today's reading, are called to pay attention to the Holy Spirit. We subordinate our agendas to God's agenda, and we look to the Spirit to open Scripture to us for guidance in what we do.

Granted, we may have different understandings of what the Holy Spirit says. Each side in a disagreement might claim that the Spirit is with them. But that's all right. The debate will have been elevated to the proper level, which is what the Holy Spirit says rather than what contemporary society says. With faith in the Spirit it will be resolved in accordance with God's will, and in that process there are ways to test what truly is from the Spirit and what is not. And again, that is another sermon.

V.

So, in today's readings we heard we are to love one another as Christ loved us. As an example of that we also saw how the church departed from earlier Scripture in order to respond to realities facing the church at the time. But the church did that for the sake of the Gospel of salvation. It did so in order to preserve the meaning of the Gospel, not to reinterpret it.

And finally, we were witness to the action of the Holy Spirit, which is the only way God's will is revealed to us. That underlies it all. Through the Holy Spirit we can be led to carry out Christ's new commandment to love one another. Through the Holy Spirit we can know the truth, and through the Holy Spirit the church can discern its path in the future. *Amen.*