

MAY 18, 2019 SERMON by JOHN TSCHUDY

ACTS 11:1-18, REVELATION 21:1-6, JOHN 13:31-35

The Council of Jerusalem was the first time church leaders gathered to determine what church policy or doctrine would be. It was sometime before 70 AD when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. The question under discussion was could non-Jews, Gentiles, the “uncircumcised” be followers of Jesus without becoming fully Jews, including circumcision. Peter was basically on trial for going into the home of a Roman Centurion and baptizing him and his whole household after teaching them about Jesus. Then he went ahead and ate with them. This made Peter unclean according to Jewish law and he had violated what up to that time had been church rules.

This is one of my favorite Bible stories because it is the one that turns Christianity from a sect of Judaism and sets it on the path of being a world religion open to all of God’s children. Peter tells the church leaders about a vision he had of a large sheet descending from heaven and on it was animals that were declared “unclean” under Jewish law and in scripture and should not be eaten, yet God commands Peter to eat them. At first Peter refuses because of obeying the law. But then God says that people should not make things unclean that God has declared clean. In commanding Peter to eat these previously forbidden animals, God is removing the biblical designation and the human interpretation of them being unclean as being wrong. Are there other things that we declare as sinful but God doesn’t? I have to believe there probably is but then an important change like this is difficult for people to make and often we don’t because “We’ve always done it that way.” Which is the attitude the early Christians in Jerusalem had.

The story of the New City of God coming down from Heaven is another important lesson that needs to be understood for today not sometime in the distant and unknown future. In this part of John of Patmos vision we see God restoring people to the relationship they were supposed to have with God at creation. In fact it brings the story full circle from the Garden in Genesis with Adam and Eve being thrown out of the Garden and the intended relationship with God in God’s presence to people again living in God’s physical presence in the New Jerusalem, or city of God. This is the relationship God intends for us. Do we worship a distant God sitting on a throne in heaven or are we living in the presence of God by the power of the Holy Spirit within us? This is the relationship with God we can have now if we have the Faith to commit to God’s way.

The Gospel lesson gives us the basis of this new relationship between God, people and each other. We are to love one another as God loves us. In other words we are to show others the kind of love that God shows to us. This commandment of Jesus to the disciples is not just for them or the band of people that followed him then. Rather it is for all that claim to be a follower of Jesus. It is a message for the institutional church as well. We are to love others and saying that we love them but hate their lifestyle or their doctrine is not fulfilling the new commandment of Jesus. What qualifiers does Jesus put on whom we are to love in issuing the new command? But here again just like in the speech of Peter and the Council of Jerusalem, people trying to define whom God thinks we should love, when God does not exclude anyone.

When you talk to many people who don’t go to church or listen to the strongest critics of the church you find similar themes. When they go to church they feel like they are going to be judged or criticized for their looks, their behavior, their lifestyle ect... And often sad to say it is true. Churches are judged on the basis of what they believe, how they worship, the style of dress of the congregation or pastor. Like the early Christians in Jerusalem judging Peter because of who he associated with, that “Long standing church tradition” continues today. If a church lets “those people” worship with them, they can’t be Christians. And often these messages of who is welcome and who isn’t are sent out without the members realizing they are sending them. Sadly often if a person has felt rejection at another church they will often feel rejection in all churches. And if they are rejected by the church often they feel rejected by God. We Christians have an awesome responsibility that we don’t recognize because we maybe too busy doing things the right way, the way we’ve always done them or just keeping the doors open, to realize the effect we may be having on people’s relationship with God.

As we honor graduates today, I feel this is one area where the modern church has failed the most. And this is why the modern church in all its forms are having a difficult time attracting young families to the church. A church geared to 50 year old folks or older because they are the ones who pay the bills, will have little attraction to younger members. This is the challenge of the modern church to make all people feel welcome in Christ’s name and loved as God loves them by the people around them.