

5 Easter – B

Acts 8:26-40

1 John 4:7-21

John 15:1-8

The text for the sermon is from 1 John: *So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them....There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because God first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.*

So sometimes it goes like this if you're a female pastor. I arrived early at my daughter's concert, took a seat next to a woman in a pastel-flowered pantsuit and got out the book I was reading, *When Jesus Became God*. And the flowered pantsuit lady asked me about it, then proceeded to ask me if I went to a church and then proceeded to ask me if I went to a Bible-believing church and then proceeded to ask me, once I told her I was the Bible-believing church's pastor, whether or not I was the youth minister and was my husband a pastor, too?

"No, it's just me," I said, trying hard not to bristle. If you're a female pastor it is regularly assumed that you work with children or that your husband is a pastor, too.

"Well, I'll be! That's just marvelous. And you must be a very gifted minister or God would not have given you such a heavy burden—a whole church all by yourself. And the men—they're okay with a lady minister? They don't, you know, feel threatened?"

"Not that I know of," I said. "I think they feel it's more about the word of God than the gender of the person speaking it."

"Well, that's true, isn't it? I mean, I know it says to keep silent in the churches, but I talk all the time. I lead the Bible study in our house church *with* my husband; it's not all him. I make sure my voice gets heard."

I'll bet you do, I thought.

But then she started going on about the lack of unity among Christians these days, no doubt thinking about those Christians who thought they were saved, but they really weren't because they didn't believe the way she believed. After a while of that she began to wax rhapsodic about the early church.

"I like to think back to the first century of the church. It must have been a wonderful time. Everyone believed the same way, there was no division, no disputing. They were *happy* in the Lord."

I bit my tongue. I didn't bring up the early church heresies: Docetism, ebionism, Gnosticism, only three of the earliest little viruses that got into the hard drive of the early church and created havoc—hence the need for the Council of Nicaea. I didn't mention that, even in the New Testament book of Acts people are quarreling over whether circumcision is good or bad, over whether or not to let the Gentiles join the Jesus club.

I didn't bring up Paul's anger at the Corinthians and the Galatians. Or the appearance of what was called "the household code" in four New Testament epistles, dictating, among other things that women were to be submissive to their husbands and slaves were to honor their masters.

"I like that passage in Colossians," she was going on dreamily, "*with gratitude in your heart sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God.* I like to imagine all those happy Christians singing."

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"All those happy Christians singing."

You know, I wrestle with the book of Acts. This means that every Easter season, when our First Lessons come not from the Hebrew scriptures but from this New Testament book that charts the growth of the early church, I struggle to write the sermons.

Now we always say that the stories in Acts recount the beginnings of the church which is more or less true, but a little simplistic. The Lutheran Study Bible says that Acts "traces the growth of the church from a small group of Jewish believers in Jerusalem to a worldwide movement that included both Jews and Gentiles."

That's a better description, but still it doesn't really tell you the whole story of Acts. Sure, there are a lot of healings; there are a lot of baptisms. There's the story of Paul's conversion and his ministry, and of the Council at Jerusalem at which it's determined Gentiles need not follow customary Jewish diet laws.

But it's not all mission and ministry. There's a lot of violence in Acts. The apostles are getting stoned or killed or arrested or flogged or ship-wrecked all throughout. There's a lot of contention in Acts. And frankly, we can trace the roots of virulent anti-Judaism that paint Jews as Christ-killers directly to these early chapters in Acts. Do you remember how, just a couple of Sundays ago, Peter addresses the Jews in the temple and he says to them, "You Israelites...you rejected the Holy and Righteous one and asked to have a murderer given to you and you killed the Author of life."

Christians really do need to be mindful of how often Jews are negatively portrayed in our sacred writings. And we must also bear in mind that Peter was speaking to fellow Jews as an observant Jew himself. The corrective we need always, always to bear in mind is found in St. Paul's own words in Romans when he is bold to proclaim the inscrutability of God's salvation for all: "O, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! 'For who has known the mind of God?'"

So I struggle with these passages from Acts with all its quarrels and trials and violence. I don't quite envision the "happy Christians singing" that the flowered pantsuit lady did when I think of the first century church.

But by now you may be wondering, since I said the sermon text was from 1 John, why ever I'm spending all this time complaining about the book of Acts?

Well, first let me complain a little more and then I'll tell you. The stories in Acts, as well as the histories written about the first few centuries of Christendom are instructive for us. They show us that religious disagreements, disagreements that foment violence, are nothing new. And it IS discouraging to know that the divisions that keep us separated as people of faith in these times are timeless.

Part of the reason I have cynically never been terrifically observant of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is that it just seems so very unlikely. And honestly, when I served in Schenectady, where there is an annual interfaith Thanksgiving service that has been going on for over seventy years, the mainline churches which typically organized these services even stopped inviting our more conservative sisters and brothers because we knew that they would never attend—and had never attended—a worship service which by its very existence posited that God could be revealed equally in other faith traditions.

Religious argumentation, exclusion and violence make me very sad and very tired. And I see all too much of that in the book of Acts.

And so I believe, as a progressive Christian and as a follower of Luther's dictum to treasure most those passages of scripture that point to Christ, we must read with scripture with a prejudicial eye. We must be on the lookout for what points to the inclusive and radical hospitality of God's love. Indeed, I think that we need value more highly those passages that speak to what we know to be true about the God revealed through Christ, the God who continues to be revealed through the Holy Spirit.

And where do we find news of that God today? Right there in 1 John. It's an overlooked gem of a Bible book, I think. Luther said of it, "This outstanding epistle so beautifully and gently pictures Christ to us" and I have to agree. Because while there is a lot of talk about abstract things—love and sin and darkness and light, there is an equal emphasis on the doing good works for one another because we love them and because we love God.

The message of 1 John is not complicated. But it is a clear call to us to claim our identity as God's own, bound in love to one another, first and last. It's love that has the best chance to heal divisions, to bring about peace, to comfort the suffering and to bind up the broken-hearted.

Hear the good news, this from John 3:

Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when God is revealed, we will be like God... and all who have this hope in God purify themselves, just as God is pure. See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. Amen.