

## Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year C)

Cathedral Church of St Peter, St Petersburg

24 April 2016

✠ **I speak to you in the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

We are at the last supper, and Judas has just gone out. The betrayal is in motion, the suffering and death are inevitable now, and I imagine a palpable change in the mood of the room, a collective intake of breath. The disciples are wondering what's next, and there is something very ominous in the air. John tells us, in the verse just before today's reading starts, "Judas immediately went out; and it was night" — and I don't think "it was night" is just meant to tell us the time of day.

And into this foreboding and unnerving night, this uneasy silence, Jesus speaks the most surprising words: "Now the Son of Man has been glorified." And suddenly the suffering and death are renamed: they are glory. They are glory, because God is love, and when the holy city comes down out of heaven from God it looks like love, like a bride adorned for her husband. The great act of self-giving love is his glory.

However exactly we should understand what Christ's suffering and death accomplish for us, and how they accomplish it—I have my theories about that, but when the new Jerusalem is coming down out of heaven from God, when the bride is adorned for her husband, is not the time for theorizing—Jesus simply offers himself, offers God's love in action. God's love, when it meets our refusal, takes the shape of a cross; but it is no less love for that, no less glorious.

And *that* is the love that he commands us: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Not gooey sentimentality, not even warm feelings, necessarily, but the love that is the glory of God, the love that is the self-offering of Christ, the love that makes the holy city, the new Jerusalem, resplendent.

The new Jerusalem is always coming down out of heaven from God, and it looks like a bride adorned for her husband. It also looks like a giant sheet full of stuff that God wants to put on our plate and we would very much prefer not to deal with.

Peter was not quite ready for the unclean, profane things—for the unclean, profane people—that God was pronouncing holy. I can imagine him spluttering a bit about it. "It's not that I have anything *against* Gentiles," he might say. (He probably couldn't

have fallen back on that old standby, “Some of my best friends are Gentiles,” because that almost certainly wasn’t the case.”) “It’s not that I have anything *against* Gentiles. It’s just that Jesus is our Messiah. He chose us, us Jews, as his disciples, as his witnesses. The Holy Spirit fell on us—at the Jewish festival of Pentecost, no less, and Jews of all languages who had come on pilgrimage were there to hear us preach the Messiah in their own tongues. I’m just not sure how Gentiles could fit into all that.”

That’s how I imagine it, anyway. It helps make sense of how the story unfolds. Unfortunately we don’t get the whole story in today’s reading from Acts. (Did you know, by the way, that the Prayer Book gives permission to lengthen any reading? Just a thought I had.) The vision that Peter had in his trance was a preparation for an encounter that God was making ready for him, though Peter was not planning on it; and as God was making that encounter ready for Peter, he was making Peter ready for that encounter. “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” Peter was puzzling over what this could possibly mean when the messengers from Cornelius arrived (he’s not named in the passage we have before us, but that was his name). God impressed on Peter that he was to go without hesitation to see Cornelius, and he did so.

What encounter is God making you ready for? What unlikely sort of person would God have you invite into the one great fellowship of love? What boundaries would he have you cross, what barriers would he have you break down, and how is he preparing you for that uncomfortable yet unspeakably precious encounter? When the holy city comes down out of heaven from God looking like a sheet full of stuff God wants to put on our plate that we’d much rather not deal with, do we get all finicky? “By no means, Lord.”

What Peter couldn’t deny was that the Holy Spirit was at work—not an easy thing to admit, right? But it was unmistakable. When he preached to Cornelius and his companions, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as the Holy Spirit had fallen on Peter and the disciples on Pentecost. It was obvious.

And then you have to baptize ‘em. And then you have to love ‘em. Because this is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, that you have love for one another. Not gooey sentimentality, not even warm feelings, necessarily, but the love that is the glory of God, the love that is the self-offering of Christ, the love that makes the holy city, the new Jerusalem, resplendent. And how difficult it must have been to love those Gentiles, who were just weird, and didn’t know any of the right hymns, and had totally the wrong pop-culture references. And let’s not pretend that it wasn’t a bumpy road. Even Peter would regress, and back off from the Gentiles for a bit, until Paul called him on

the carpet about it.

But the pattern had been established. They could eat together. They could gather around the table together, and there Jesus again offered himself, offered God's love in action, his generosity poured out so that we too might be generous, his Spirit poured out on all, the holy city coming down out of heaven from God, looking like bread and wine, as angels and archangels and all the company of heaven look on in wonder.

The holy city, the new Jerusalem, is always coming down out of heaven from God. Sometimes it looks like a bride adorned for her husband. Sometimes it looks like a sheet full of stuff God wants to put on our plate and we'd much rather not deal with. Sometimes it looks like betrayal and thorns and abandonment and blood and agony. Sometimes it looks like bread and wine. But always—even when it looks like the Cross—always, it looks like love.