

## **Sermon Fifth week of Easter Year C Acts 11:1-18 5.2.10 by Ron Kolanowski**

Last week's reading from Acts we heard of Dorcas who associated with a group of widows—she was a believer who connected with people that society relegated to the margins. This week's story from Acts continues a call to include all people, especially those residing on the margins or kept out of community. It is one of those pivotal reading that changed something fundamental in the church's understanding of itself.

One of the lessons I learned from our new bishop Ian Douglas when I was a student of his is his understanding of the mission of the church. Ian taught that the church doesn't have a mission, it has a purpose. The church doesn't have a mission, but God does. He taught that what we need to do is to continually ask ourselves how are we called now to participate in advancing God's mission. Bishop Douglas holds that the mission of God is nothing short of reconciling the whole world to God's self—that means everyone and everything in the world without exception....and we have a role to play in that.

The reading from Acts is an important message in advancing God's mission of reconciliation. This reading is about who is IN and who is OUT. The new faith in the risen Jesus was first and foremost proclaimed to Jews. The baptism of the Spirit at Pentecost among the disciples was a baptism among Jewish followers of Jesus. Today's reading turns the notion that this new faith is only for Jews on its head.

In the earliest days of the church long before the followers of Jesus called themselves Christians they were called “the Way.” It was considered a sect within Judaism that lived communally and broke down some of the barriers between rich and poor, men and women. But one barrier that was hotly debated was the barrier of who was inside and who was outside of the community. From the perspective of many followers in THE WAY, adherence to Jewish law was still essential for membership in this new community. However, the vision that Peter had of unclean ‘forbidden’ food being lowered on a sheet from heaven and he being told to eat was at serious odds with Jewish tradition. In short, the possibility of inclusion of Gentiles in THE WAY was a total revolution. Jews and Gentiles were to be separate. However, the Spirit chose to let all people into this new Jesus community and WAY of living. Our debates about who is in and who is out today, pale by comparison to the enormity of the change brought about by allowing Gentiles into the community.

Again, this morning the message invites us to look to the margins as to who we continue to keep at arms length from ourselves and our community. During the consecration of Gene Robinson as bishop of New Hampshire, the homilist Bishop Doug Thuener quoting Lamin Sanneh of Yale University had this to say about those on the margins. *“When we attempt to bring the margins into the center we necessarily push the center to the margins. If Canterbury or New York for instance, wishes to help Nigeria or the West Indies move toward the center, then for everyone to occupy the space available, Canterbury or New York must be willing to move toward the margin. We who have been in the center don’t like*

*moving to the margin, even to different places on it, but we must do that if we're going to affirm the marginalized. That was the thrust of our Lord's ministry and it brought Him a cross. How can it not do the same to anyone who does as He did?"*

This, I believe is true. None of us wants to give up our control and power and move toward the margins, but that is the very place that we encounter those who have been relegated there by our society, or by the church. It is also the place we most fully encounter the divine.

In the gospel today we hear Jesus telling us, *"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."* We have heard this commandment many times before, but the part that I think is worthy of touching on today is the "How we are to love part." He says love as I have loved. As bishop Thuener said, Jesus loved by going to the margins in order to love and he was killed for doing so. Yet, this is what Jesus calls us to.

We are called to leave our comfort zone and travel to Ecuador to we encounter people who are suffering because of our life-style of over consumption and appetite for cheap goods. We are called to set aside our preconceived notions and visit those in prisons. We are to set aside our pride and open our hearts and our hands to the homeless and the homebound. We are called to move into a level of discomfort to help young people who are wrestling with a host of societal pressures and expectations, including sexual identity.

I want to tell a story to illustrate what can happen when someone on the margin feels solidarity with others who are marginalized. When we left Gene Robinson's consecration in 2004 we stopped at a restaurant for dinner. It was getting late and our waitress had a long hard day, you could see it on her face. She asked us where we were coming from we told her we were just at the consecration of the new Episcopal Bishop of New Hampshire and told her some of Gene's story. With that, she felt an instant bond with our little group. She told me that she was Catholic and came from a church that constantly held up her sinfulness and that she didn't have much time for church. She also shared that she was abused sexually by her father for years and felt guilty and ashamed about that. Then she said something surprising. She said, *"if God can find a way to make a gay man a bishop" then maybe there is hope for me.*" With tears in her eyes she saw something for herself. She saw the possibility of coming closer to the center. In that moment she experienced the redemptive love of God extending to her. I left that restaurant hopeful that God speaks from the margins of life in order to teach us something about life and about ourselves. This story gives me hope at those times when the problems of the world seem hopeless...I can remember a tired waitress getting a glimpse of God's love of her in a life filled with pain, shame and guilt.

My brothers and sisters from our place of privilege and abundance, let us not be afraid to move toward the margins in order that God can teach us

something new about ourselves and our responsibility to love as Jesus loved....and if necessary to be willing to pay a price for it. Amen.