

The Easter Season

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

April 24, 2016

Easter 5C

John 13:31-35

New Love For a Change

A GOD of new things calls us to a new love

—The Rev. Drew Downs

Peter breaks the news that he is doing a new thing. A shockingly new thing.

He is opening up the boundaries of the faith to gentiles because **he** has been opened up to this by GOD. And he is saying that this is GOD's new thing.

He can't appeal to Torah or Isaiah or Jeremiah - there is no appeal. He gets a dream - a vision from GOD. A lot like what Paul gets. He receives this new prophecy. There is no more profane. No more ritual purity. No more circumcision. No more tribalism. No more in and out. No more Jew or Greek. That is all over.

GOD is doing something new. And these people aren't used to GOD doing new things.

They can hardly stand the idea that GOD was doing something new in Jesus. That they can get a defense for. Look that up in Scripture. There's a bunch of Messiah stuff, new Elijah, Son of Humanity stuff. There was the anticipation of a new king and a new order coming.

The Spirit, though? That's new. Visions and expanding the Kingdom? That's new too. Preaching equality and inclusion. New.

How are they supposed to trust Peter? How do they trust this (or any) new thing?

Our New Things

In our postmodern world, this question is actually harder for us to answer than ever.

The dominant character of the Enlightenment, of this time of great awakening and scientific discovery, is that the material world is far more ordered, complex, and frankly mysterious than it ever was before. As Richard Rohr recently argued, Christians should have been the first supporters of these scientific discoveries--especially evolution--rather than those fighting it. And the reason we fought them was because we thought we had a better system.

We thought we knew better than GOD.

We should have been the scientific community's cheering section. And yet it is precisely what frightens us: that there is something material to our world and that GOD is at different times in the business of interrupting it.

And even worse than that: worse than all this discovery in the 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th,

20th centuries: is the thought that GOD actually isn't done breaking in. That GOD wasn't done 2000 years ago when a baby showed up and totally changed the course of human civilization. That GOD would change the script in Jesus, not just once, but over and over again throughout our history.

GOD doesn't give us a new king, GOD comes as a baby, a carpenter, an itinerant preacher, a wandering healer, a homeless man with a collection of disciples he picked up at the lake. And then teaches about power in weakness and reign in service and would be subjected to human death. But *this* is what GOD does.

That GOD would come in new scriptures and in evangelism and in native spiritualities and in pluralistic societies and in monastics and mystics and heretics burned on a tree and then later strung up on one to swing by a noose and in royal priesthoods and in kings and one really mighty queen and her modern successor (who is 90 years old this week!) and in the people and in rebellion and in scripture we canonize and the more powerful scripture written on the margins that freaks us out right now.

GOD comes in all of these ways and it doesn't fit our modernist brains and it doesn't fit the box our parents and teachers taught us to put GOD into. Like the junk which argues that GOD hasn't inspired anyone to write anything in 1900 years (which is total bologna). That King James was the only one who got the Bible

"right". That all that baggage we thrust upon GOD is what props up our faith in GOD.

Believing GOD doesn't do new things? Our faith doesn't allow room for it? This is actually an affront to GOD.

Lazarus: the Love Revelation

In the gospel we call John, we read about a great division between the people about Jesus. They don't know how to read this guy. Over and over he stumps them. And it is this division about GOD doing a new thing which is the real source of conflict.

They keep seeing him healing, revealing GOD and a big bunch are moved and come to believe. And another big bunch say the same thing each time: *GOD doesn't work that way*. And the new believers say back to them *but GOD would; maybe GOD is. Because these aren't evil things Jesus is doing*. He is doing good things. GOD has always been revealed differently.

This is where we were last week, in chapter 10 when the people were about to stone Jesus for the second time. Street justice. Good guys with stones. And then the next chapter happens. Jesus goes to his friend Lazarus, who is dying. And instead of preventing his death, he raises him *from death*.

And this is kind of a weird story and it doesn't make a lot of sense in a certain way: in that scientific, modernist way. It isn't an action of pure good and rational reason.

But Jesus says from the beginning that this moment: what is happening right here: isn't about saving Lazarus' life, but that Lazarus would reveal GOD. Lazarus, raised from the dead, shows GOD breaking through, is GOD doing a new thing, is GOD being seen as if for the very first time by human eyes.

This story of Lazarus is the centerpiece of John's gospel. This story reveals GOD. Reveals that GOD isn't about life and death in static scientific terms, but in living, vibrant living; what the writer keeps calling "eternal life". That GOD is about *new things*, about *living transformed lives*, about *being made new*.

So when we get to the last supper and Jesus has gathered his followers together to eat, he says that one of them will betray him and it is the one who he feeds bread to. Yet, when he feeds it to Judas, the disciples don't get it. Judas is about to run away and they think he left a burner on or something.

It is in this moment, in the revealing of betrayal, which Jesus tells them to love. To love each other. This is how GOD loves: that GOD is willing to change the script and the very definition of love.

And the *coup de grace*? That love extends even to Judas.

Love like it's a new thing

My friend, David Henson recently wrote about how Jesus's new understanding of love includes Judas. Which is something we never think about it.

In Luke-Acts, the women return to "the Eleven" to report the resurrection, and the disciples later elect Matthias to replace Judas.

In Matthew, Judas hangs himself and toward the end, "the Eleven" go to Galilee.

In Mark, Jesus appeared "to the Eleven."

But in John, Jesus appears to all the disciples except Thomas, who was one of "the Twelve." It's a remarkable, arresting phrase to read after the resurrection in light of the other gospels and to realize that in John, no one is missing. Judas hasn't fallen headlong in a field, hung himself, or just disappeared from the story. In John, they are whole. They are still Twelve disciples, not Eleven.

Perhaps the writer of John is thinking of it as a name: The Twelve. Like the Big Ten with 14 teams. But it is an arresting name for it precisely counts Judas two days after his betrayal. His presence is there with them. A betrayal foreshadowed throughout John, but not resolved or written into the chapters after. Precisely as if reconciliation with Judas is the story--and it is our story. Our reconciliation with the betrayer. Our reconciliation with our betrayers.

Jesus is the one always saying *you've heard it said, but I say to you...* because there is new stuff always coming at us. There is new work to do and new love to build.

This sounds really hard, and the church has

been really bad at it for a long time, but it isn't for lack of trying. But maybe for lack of changing. Lack of acknowledging GOD changes. That GOD is into doing new things.

Recently, I heard that the kind of love we're called to is like singing. And if we know about our voices, it is physically impossible to sing in true unison. We can't. Even the most talented singers can't do it. This was on my daughter's favorite science show, *Brains On!* and yet when we harmonize, we achieve a vocal connection we can't get in unison.

We are literally more together when we sing different parts.

This love we're called to: a love of friend and of enemy; of disciple and of betrayer; of family and of terrorist; it is a love that is different than the love we're taught and the love we see in Hallmark cards and on Valentine's Day and even the love of a parent for a child. It is a love of true forgiveness and harmony. A love of unity through difference and of helping all people. It is a love which breaks political boundaries and demands more than we know.

It is love. It is perfect. And it is our invitation to participate in GOD's next unveiling, in GOD's next revelation, in GOD's next great invention for all of creation. This is our love. A different love for a different world. A love like no other love. A love so radically new we have spent 2000 years trying to figure out how to do it. A love that says even

this church, this old dog has new tricks. New love to share. To give. To make known to the world.