

Easter 5C
May 2, 2010

St. Andrew's

Acts 11.1-18
Ps 148
Revelation 21.1-6
John 13.31-35

Several years ago while our son, Andrew, was at college in Evansville, Indiana, I took a trip to nearby New Harmony. It sits on the Wabash River, about 15 miles north of the confluence with the Ohio River. New Harmony was founded in 1814 by a group of 800 Lutheran dissenters from Wurttemberg, Germany. The Harmonie Society, led by George Rapp, arrived in the United States in 1804 seeking religious freedom. They had been dissatisfied with the state church's overly educated ministers and the lack of spiritual rebirth in the congregations.

They contended that the church had decayed and that through the guidance of the Holy Spirit they were trying to restore Christianity to the state of the first Christians as described in the Acts of the Apostles, including communal living. It was their intention to create a Utopia; a society of perfection based on religious ideals. Their first community was established as Harmony, Pennsylvania.

They were successful on many levels for 10 years; they were completely self-sufficient and produced a wide variety of goods that were traded as far away as New Orleans and Pittsburgh; Germany and the British Isles. But in 1824 George Rapp decided to sell New Harmony and the group returned to Pennsylvania. There were a number of reasons: the distance from their markets, malaria, problems with the neighbors, and isolation from their cultural background.

In addition, they believed in celibacy which was NOT successfully practiced in the community. Those who were not celibate were banished and those who maintained celibacy arrived at their natural conclusion. The Harmonists literally died out by the end of the 19th century... ☺

I have no doubt that the Harmonists were attempting to live out Jesus' commandment from John's gospel: to love one another as Jesus had loved them and that everyone would know they were Christians by that love. Their attempt to create a society which lived out that truth in harmony with each other was honorable and of good intent. Its ultimate failure must have had much to do with the isolation which it experienced and indeed had originally desired.

We can't be Christians in isolation. We'd like to. It really would be easier to cloister ourselves and convince ourselves of our rightness and righteousness. It makes us feel better to find someone nearby who is wrong and therefore not one of us. Barbara Crafton writes that we hope to shine righteously against the surly backdrop of someone else's conspicuous sin. We might like to be a Harmonist and separate ourselves from The Other so that we can remain untarnished by the nastiness and apparent hopelessness of the world. The church seems to do that pretty well sometimes. We spend an inordinate amount of energy making the rules about who's in and who's out or arguing about who knows what God thinks and who doesn't.

Fred Craddock writes that Peter dared to redefine who should be included in God's fellowship. I don't think we can begin to understand the turmoil this must have generated in Peter. Every bit of his past had reinforced the distinction between clean and unclean. All the Hebrew laws he had learned compelled him to ask whether the food he was about to eat was kosher. Was it beef or pork? Where did it come from? How was it slaughtered? All this was done to ensure that nothing "profane or unclean" would ever cross his lips.

Craddock continues by saying that the very God who was responsible for these distinctions was now telling Peter to ignore them, that the former distinctions would no longer hold. His universe of meaning was being challenged to its core. Everything the purity codes had taught him, all he knew about the Law and the Prophets and of Israel being the elect – the chosen – was being shaken up.

His vision of a sheet descending with all sorts of animals on it symbolizes the vast diversity of humankind. The distinctions traditionally made between Jews and Gentiles no longer hold. Any deep-seated sense in Peter of religious superiority is being challenged. His entire world is being reconfigured. It was akin to the Civil Rights Movement. "I have to go to school with who?" "I have to live next to who?" "I have to eat with who? Even a Gentile?"

Peter got it. We still don't. It's why we must legislate "equality" by list. "Do not discriminate on the basis of race, age, creed, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, nationality, political views, etc..." let we forget someone to be "equal" with. "Health care for everyone?? Sweet, Jesus, even the Gentiles?"

When Peter arrived at Cornelius' house and preached, the Spirit led those Gentiles to salvation. Peter concluded that God had given them the same gift God had given to Jewish believers. Joseph Harvard invites us to think about the astonishing insight contained in Peter's question: "Who was I that I could hinder God?" Who are we to try to limit the mission of God to redeem humanity? Peter's conclusion was revolutionary.

Every time we exclude someone from full participation in the redemptive efforts of God, Peter's question should trouble us and the church.

In 2007 a California based research firm called The Barna Group found that perceived church attitudes about people in general and gays in particular are driving a negative image of the Christian faith among people ages 16-29. They reported that the vast majority of non-Christians — 91% — said Christianity had an anti-gay image, followed by 87% who said it was judgmental, 85% who said it was hypocritical and 70% that it was insensitive to others. The views of the Church did not fare much better with church-goers who had similar opinions although in slightly smaller percentages.

David Kinnaman, the Barna Group president, said one of the biggest surprises for researchers was the extent to which respondents — one in four non-Christians — said that modern-day Christianity was no longer like Jesus. These are some frightening statistics about how the world views Christianity and Christians.

“Who was I that I could hinder God?” said Peter . . .

Jesus makes no distinction of whom The Other is. At this Last Supper that he had with his disciples, he has deep tenderness and a final commandment to give them. It doesn't have anything to do with getting back at those who are about to kill him or those who have threatened and misunderstood his ministry all along. It is to love each other – in the broadest sense. This is not the sentimental love of loving butterflies, tulips or baseball. It is even more than the deep and intimate love two people can have for each other. This love is beyond anything we have experienced except the love God has for us.

That kind of love is what will define the new heaven. In the Revelation to John our image of heaven is changed from a romanticized version of clouds and babbling brooks to plainly and simply the place where God is, says Dana Ferguson. This is the most important detail: heaven is where God is and humans are fully united with God. In this heaven is a message of love and acceptance and inclusion for everyone.

The ancient world didn't want to hear that message any more than the world does now. Jesus challenges us. The command to love which he gives us is to be the foundation of our faith and the bedrock of our lives. Why is it that the world sees us as contentious and exclusive and divisive, making rules for The Other and not following them ourselves? Is it because they see us fighting over worthiness and authority? Do they see us silent in the face of immigration laws which strip away human dignity and literally tear families apart?

Or do they see Christianity being lived out? It can't consist only of good thoughts in our private spiritual lives and churches. It can't be a moral code of being a “good person” or knowing right from wrong. Lots of people who aren't Christians are good people and take care of their neighbors when they are sick and give to charities.

Christians have more to proclaim about love than being nice or generous or compassionate. We proclaim a savior; we proclaim that Jesus is the Christ, that through him we are given a glimpse of the Kingdom of God and that we are called to be a part of its unfolding through the love we demonstrate in a needy world. It is news we cannot keep to ourselves and the world will know it not only by what we say, but by what we do. We are to act it out with Jesus as our model; loving expansively and inclusively out in the world.

It would be easier to have our own versions of New Harmony, Indiana, in each of our homes or churches or communities. It is so much simpler to figure out how to build the walls and make the rules to keep the riff raff out of our version of Utopia. Jesus knew nothing of that. He fraternized with the poor, the unemployed, the dirty, the undocumented workers, and those who eventually killed him in their righteousness. And he loved them. Not because they were perfect and without sin. But because they were children of God.

“Who am I that I can hinder God?” The church is called to be the example of Christ's love in the world; the hands and feet of our Risen Savior; a light to the world. This week, this year, who in Port Angeles will know we are Christians? Everyone, Jesus says. When our love is a story of the things we do, of the ways we step into a hurting world and participate in its healing. Let all the people see it.

Gail Wheatley+