

Sunday's Sermon

GLORIA DEI LUTHERAN CHURCH

250 Fox Hill Road ■ Hampton, Virginia 23669

May 15, 2022

The Reverend David E. Fox

Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year C) 2022

Acts 11.1-18

Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Within the last twenty years, I have begun to notice the trend of having a community table within restaurants, coffee houses, and bars is hanging on and seems to be gaining popularity. A community table is where more than one party can sit at the same table to enjoy their meal and/or beverage. Restaurant, coffee house, and bar owners like the convenience of serving to one table and the space it saves to sit individuals and smaller groups all at one table rather than multiple tables that are spread out across the dining room. Single diners and parties of two are asked if they would like a seat at the community table. Those who choose to share their dining experience with other diners soon realize that barriers are torn down and conversation is easily exchanged.

I will admit that I'm not one who seeks out the community table experience. That is in part, because the older I get the more of an introvert I become; and usually when I tell people I'm a pastor, because it's going to come up, they either stop talking to me all together or begin to act differently. Though I don't find myself at one of these tables often, I still like the idea of drawing people together and in so doing, tearing down barriers and building up community.

Many of us, since high school, have been able to choose with whom we sit down to meal. Usually it is our friends and/or family. Sometimes it is in connection with our work or a shared hobby. With whom are you willing to sit down over a meal?

In our reading from Acts, we heard a repeat of what happened in chapter ten; because Peter is being questioned by other followers of the Way on why he sat down to a meal with an uncircumcised, Gentile, Roman centurion and his family. They felt Peter had made a gross error in dining with such people. For the early church, many felt that Jesus' love and salvation only extended to a certain few – those who were circumcised, Hebrew people, that followed the traditional food laws. Peter may have very well felt the same way, but through his experience, in a vision, he found that his own self-interest was getting in the way of God's bigger plan.

The bulk of Peter's vision helped him to realize that the food he was accustomed to eating and the way he ate did not make him a better person than anyone else, and it was certainly not to be used as a barrier to and for other people. My favorite line that Peter shares from his vision and from this entire text, is the part where the Spirit tells Peter not to make a distinction between them and us. Don't make a distinction between them and us.

When the Spirit empowered Peter to knock down any barriers that Peter might have put up, to sharing God's love and eating with those that were different than him – those that he had a prejudice against – after all the barriers were knocked down community was beginning to be built. We know that building up community began to happen because Cornelius' entire household – young and old, male and female, slave and free – were filled with the Holy Spirit and were baptized.

The church grew that day, because Peter and his six companions decided to sit down to eat with those who were different than them. By joining this household for a meal, there was no longer an “us and them” kind of mentality. Many of us, since high school, have been able to choose with whom we sit down to meal. Usually it is our friends and/or family. Sometimes it is in connection with our work or a shared hobby. With whom are you willing to sit down over a meal?

How far does God’s circle extend, sisters and brothers? That was the question that the council in Jerusalem were trying to figure out. The food laws and purity laws were a big deal for the Hebrew people. This would not have been an easy decision for them. I’m sure there were some who still didn’t like the idea, but we don’t hear grumbling about who God’s love was extended to, rather we hear about their praise.

The church, for too long, has determined who it is and who it is not going to sit down with for supper. Ninety-percent of churches have a sign somewhere that reads “All are Welcome.” Yet, the Sunday morning worship hour is still the most segregated time in our country. We have divided ourselves based on color, based on political feelings, based on who we love, based on economic status, and the list goes on. If your blood pressure went up when I mentioned any of those groups that you don’t identify as, you are certainly one of those struggling the most with the Spirit’s call to not make a distinction between us and them.

Leonard Sweet, one of my favorite contemporary Christian scholars and authors, recently posted on social media, “Our churches must decide very quickly whether Christianity is to be a religion against some humans and for other humans. Or whether Christianity is a faith for all humans, a religion for all humanity. This does not mean anything goes. But it does mean everyone comes.”

God’s circle extends beyond our own self interests. It extends across all barriers created by human minds and human hands. It does not stop at certain sins over other sins. It does not turn away from those who we are uncomfortable around. It extends to even those with whom we would never find ourselves sitting down to a meal.

Many of us, since high school, have been able to choose with whom we sit down to meal. Usually it is our friends and/or family. Sometimes it is in connection with our work or a shared hobby. With whom are you willing to sit down over a meal? The Holy Spirit is not calling us to build higher walls; rather the Holy Spirit is calling us to build bigger tables.

Sisters and brothers, in our Gospel reading, Jesus gives us a new commandment, to love one another. We find ourselves around the table with those we love. May our love extend beyond our own inner circles, beyond our own self-interests, beyond those who look like us and act like us, to where we can sit at the table with those we have little to nothing in common, those we do not agree with on many levels, and those who don’t fall in line with the traditions we have toed the line with our entire lives. Today, we are being called to dine at the community table with all in the world that God created and called very good.

God doesn’t make junk. Remember, the Scripture says “For God so loved the world.” Not parts of it. Not just those who do this or who do that. All of it. Even the parts we steer clear of. All of humankind is worthy to be invited and to eat at our tables.

Let us join in the praising found at the end of our reading in Acts today. Let us not only invite all the people in the world to our table, but let us also love all the people in the world. And, let us seek out Jesus while seated at the community table, where all are invited and all are welcomed.