

There was a little boy, an only child, five years old, who was about to start Kindergarten. Although he was bright and friendly, not overly shy or timid, he didn't seem to have any interest in going to school. His parents circled the date on the calendar and counted down the days with him; his neighbors and people at church would ask him if he was excited for Kindergarten, but he kept saying *no, not really*. When he finally went to school, his parents couldn't wait to get *some* reaction from him. And he said, *It was OK, but I don't know why everyone made such a big deal about it. It really wasn't that exciting... Well*, his mother said, *It was only the first day. Maybe it will be more exciting tomorrow... Tomorrow?!?* he said. *You mean, I have to go back again tomorrow?* Somehow he had missed that this was just the first day of the next 13 years of school, at least. Today, when we pair John's account of Jesus' last commandment with the Acts story of Peter keeping company with Gentiles, I imagine the early emerging church reacting in much the same way as that new kindergarten student: *What do you mean I have to keep on doing this?*

It hasn't been too long since we read this same gospel for Maundy Thursday; Jesus spends the night of his arrest teaching his disciples since, as he says, he will not be with them much longer. The "he" who went out in that first verse was Judas, so Jesus has already been betrayed, as choosing not to be in relationship with Jesus is what being unfaithful or unbelieving means in John's gospel. For those who *have* remained with him, this is Jesus' last chance to explain how to keep following him after his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. 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.*

It may seem odd that Jesus describes this as a "new" commandment. All along he has been teaching them to love their neighbors and even to love their enemies, so loving one another doesn't sound all that new. But *loving one another just as [he] has loved...* Well, that raises the bar considerably. Jesus loved a woman at a well who had been left by five husbands. Jesus loved a Pharisee who would only sneak out to talk to him in secret at night. Jesus loved a blind man who everyone blamed for being born blind. Jesus loved a woman who was about to be stoned for adultery. Jesus loved thousands of hungry people who didn't earn their lunch. Jesus loved on the Sabbath, Jesus loved in Samaria, Jesus loved doubters, deniers, and betrayers, and Jesus loved Gentiles. *Love one another just as I have loved you* is a new commandment, not because God suddenly commanded acts of loving service, but because Jesus loved across all the lines that generations of God's people had drawn to limit who counted as *one another*; the lines they had drawn to give themselves permission *not* to love those *other* people.

Broadly speaking, the book of Acts is the story of how that loving community expanded beyond the 11 surviving disciples, hiding in a locked room, to include the whole rest of the world. Chapter after chapter details some new person or group being included in the growing church. We would think this was universally understood to be a good thing, but notice how our chapter of Acts

begins: *the [Jewish] believers heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God...* So far so good, right? That's what we'd hope people would do... But then... *when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"* The conflict wasn't over following or not following Jesus; the problem was that this *loving one another* thing that Jesus had commanded was starting to include people who weren't like them. I know almost nothing about Star Trek apart from the line, *You will be assimilated. Resistance is futile...* And that assimilation is not a good thing. Assimilation—that is, forcing uniformity, and inclusion—that is, appreciating diversity, are two very different ways of getting along in the world. Let's see which way the church is called to go.

Peter explains that God showed him a vision of a tablecloth full of kosher and non-kosher animals together and tells him to kill and eat. Peter, who never misses an opportunity to argue with God, says *No way—I've never eaten anything profane or unclean*. Three times he has to be told *What God has made clean, you must not call profane*. Then Peter is called to a Gentile household with instructions from the Spirit *not to make a distinction between them and us*. Christians love to point to this passage to justify eating bacon cheeseburgers, but getting lost in the menu misses the more important point. The vision taught Peter not to make that distinction between people: *them and us*. Because Jesus didn't say *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, that you are circumcised*; or *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, that you don't eat shrimp*. But, *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, that you love one another*. How is it that Christians, especially Christians in positions of authority, have spent so much of our collective history making distinctions between *them* and *us*?

God did give Israel dietary limitations. And God did set Israel apart, although that setting apart was for a purpose, to live as a shining example that would draw all other nations to God. But going all the way back to Genesis, we do *not* read that God made certain parts of creation bad; we read that God saw that everything God made was good. It's humans who confuse *different* with *bad* or *different* with *worth less* or *different* with *person I'm not going to love and I'm going to pretend that the reason I won't love them is because I'm such a good disciple of Jesus*. Peter finishes his explanation by saying *If God gave them the same gift God gave us, who was I that I could hinder God?* And when we put it that way, who wants to be the person who thinks they can hinder God? The believers in Jerusalem thought they were done doing what Jesus commanded: *loving one another*. Then *one another* became a lot more people, and notably a lot *different* people, than they expected, and they realized that they were just getting started. When we look at our world today, and how many ways we still try to divide God's beloved children into *them* and *us*, so we can justify loving only *us* and denying the full humanity of *them*, it is clear that we, too, are just getting started obeying Jesus' *still* "new" commandment to *love one another just as I have loved you*. That is the work to which God has called us. Who are we that we would hinder God?