

Acts 11:1-18 • Psalm 148 • Revelation 21:1-6 • John 13:31-35 • Easter 5 • Year C •  
May 2, 2010 • St. Thomas, Hanover, New Hampshire

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you have ever served on a debate team or taken part in the formal art of persuasion, you are likely to be familiar with the use of fallacious argument. I think it is safe to say that all of us have been part of conversations that included logical flaws, whether we were on the receiving end or the giving end. You've probably heard someone misquote statistics in order to bolster their argument, or if you are a parent, you have probably heard something like, "but Mom, everybody has one" or there is the ever-popular church favorite, "It's always been done that way."

The goal of a debate is of course to win, to state your case in such a way as to persuade. Sometimes in debate, when a side feels it is losing ground, the strategy changes. Statements might be made to divert attention from the real matter at hand. Think *red herring*. Sometimes a diversionary tactic can turn into a personal attack on one's opponent. Such a rhetorical device serves to bait the opponent and sometimes it works, derailing the opponent's otherwise sound arguments. Deflections may win a formal debate, but are not very useful in achieving real world solutions to real world problems.

I'm sure you've noticed that our national discourse has been diverted so that the very climate of debate about public issues serves to polarize rather than fostering an environment to solve our nation's problems for the common good. The current climate is a triumph of greed over generosity, of power over service, of diversion over the harder work of actually getting along.

Our scripture lessons today are guides through the murky waters of our complex society. From them we can learn about how to live together, love together and serve together. In the reading from Acts, we heard Peter tell the story of how he had been persuaded to be more inclusive. I hope you caught the details of how the story began. It is instructive for us to notice because the conflict was not between adversarial groups but was within the household of faith. It was between Peter and other believers who, like Peter, had moved beyond their traditional Jewish faith in acceptance of God's new revelation. They were all part of the early Christian church.

The criticism made by the Jerusalem believers was not against the issue of including the Gentiles in the new body of the church, but against Peter personally. They criticized him for his rather Christ-like actions. But Peter did not rise to the bait. The text says that he began to explain it to them, step by step. This was a transformed Peter, whose considered and thoughtful narrative is quite different from the Peter who seemed to blurt out the first thing that crossed his mind, the man who reacted out of emotion, the man who had been afraid to admit that he knew Jesus.

Peter's story is one of personally overcoming prejudice and racism. In telling his story in Jerusalem, he didn't soften the details of his own difficulty. He had not immediately accepted God's call to go and meet with the Gentiles. He also acknowledged God's preparation of Cornelius, the man who had sent for Peter. In fact, Peter's personal struggle fueled his conviction that God was at work and his patience in explaining step by step what had happened.

The outcome was as positive as it could possibly be. The challenging believers agreed that Peter's story was a story of God at work in the world. At its essence, the story was not about Peter or the Gentiles or the Jerusalem believers. It was not about the validity or necessity of circumcision. It was about God at work in the world in a new way. Beyond prior experience and even imagination, the Holy Spirit had stepped outside the box of the best religious thinking.

The text says, "When they heard this, they were silenced." The self-righteous, power-grasping, critical part of the Jerusalem believers was silenced. Simultaneously, they opened their heart's door to the Holy Spirit and, recognizing God in their midst, they began to worship. God was praised for this new creation: for the widening of the circle to fully include "the other." Equally miraculous and worthy of praise was God's gift of openness exhibited by both Peter and Cornelius to hear and to act without fear.

This vignette in the life of Peter was not, as we know, the end of the story. The problem of prejudice and discrimination was not overcome once and for all, but has been a continuing struggle—for Peter, for the Church universal and for individual Christians in all times and places. But this *was* a sacramental moment, when the invisible work of the Spirit was made visible in the unity of believers. Their praise celebrated a breaking open of that which divides us, giving them and us a glimpse of the new Jerusalem.

This new Jerusalem, the new heaven and new earth of which our reading from Revelation speaks is described as the culmination and ultimate versions of what we know now. As strange and mysterious as John's future vision seems, there is a connection with what already is. There are glimpses now of what will be. St. Paul describes it as seeing in

a mirror dimly [I Cor. 13]. The old will not ultimately be annihilated, but will somehow be renewed, reinvigorated into something better. The old box will not be thrown away, but will be opened up to be part of and to embrace a new way of being.

Jesus was an example of this new way of being. His manner of life turned upside down the assumptions and rules for relationship with God and with one another. The setting of the passage from John that I read this morning is the last supper. Judas had just left to set betrayal in motion. Jesus could have attacked Judas to the others. He could have built himself up by cutting Judas down. But his way, his truth, his life was to focus on God and God's glory.

The glory revealed in Christ was unexpected. It was not about public approval or about his reputation, but about divine epiphany, shining outward, illuminating life. It was visible in his loving and humble service to others. Christ would demonstrate glory by his obedience to God in death and in his resurrection. This dynamic and reciprocal glory between the Father and the Son would not be put off until an unnamed eternity, but would be seen in the now, for the benefit of the disciples and their understanding of Jesus' life and passion.

The new commandment is a further revelation of God's glory, a concrete sign of our participation in God's new creation. It also demonstrates connection between the old and the new. We know the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself is one of the most ancient of the commandments. It can be found way back in the Old Testament book of Leviticus, having been given as one of the ways that the people of God were to distinguish themselves in their living in the world.

The newness of this commandment to love extends, deepens and fulfills the earlier command. The bar is set higher. Jesus told the disciples to love one another, not as they loved themselves, but as he loved them. Jesus had demonstrated that he loved the disciples more than he loved himself. The command is to love because the other is of God. We are, in fact, to love God in the other. St. Chrysostom heard Jesus' words this way: "My love has not been the payment of something owing to you," is not a response to you, "but it had its beginning on my side." [Homilies on the Gospel of John 72.5] "Now," Jesus said, "you go and do likewise. This manner of loving will be so distinctive and excellent that it in itself will be a clear sign of discipleship."

Think about owning that statement as a way to relate to others: "My love is given not because I owe it to you like a payment, but it begins on my side." This manner of loving is evidence of God's presence in us and it is God's presence that we celebrate as sacrament, gathering in a few moments around the bread and the wine. God is present—in the world, in you and in me, in ways that we know and in ways that can surprise us. Loving as Christ loved is a challenge and it is by this loving that others will know we are Christ's disciples. Amen.