

Sermon on John 13:31-35
Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 19, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Today I want to let you in on a little-known ministry secret: how the most mundane problems bring up critical theological questions. For example, one week after burying my father-in-law, I returned to the daily joys, problems and decisions of parish pastor life. The first problem to present itself was this: the key did not open the parking lot door. Now, Redeemer has two main doors to the outside world. The front door, facing north, seldom used and usually locked, is painted red for welcome. The southwest door to the parking lot, which you probably entered today, is constantly used, but it refused to unlock since Thursday afternoon. After 45 years, the panic door and locking mechanism have worn out. So we are faced with a decision: buy a new door or replace the panic door mechanism and locks. It also presented us with a practical dilemma: if people cannot enter the door even with a key, how do we safely lock the church without denying entrance to the very people we wish to serve? It has also become a theological problem: what is the purpose of a door anyway? Is it to provide a welcome entrance, or safety and security to the people inside? I began to wonder, "*What does this mean for us?*" It's a theological problem because God wants us to welcome all who enter for worship or ministry here, and God also wants us to provide safety to all God's children who enter here. Is a door for protection and safety or for welcome entry? Would you believe that it's both? Yes! For you Lutherans, this is a prime example of our *both/and* paradox in the Church. A door provides safety and a welcome entrance, so our responsibility as a congregation is that it both opens freely and locks securely, as needed! Welcome to my life, where nothing is absolute!

Some say that little is absolute in our faith. Except for one thing: how God so loves the world. God has created us all out of love, in order to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourself. God's love is one absolute in the Bible. So we have been called by God, through Jesus, to love one another as he has loved us. But so often we fall short – so very, very short!

Do you remember Rodney King? He was an African American construction worker who fled police in his car one night, was stopped and beaten by several Los Angeles police in 1991. A resident videotaped the beating, which went viral on the media, and the police were charged. In the trial, the police were acquitted, which infuriated many. After a week of civil unrest, 63 persons were killed, thousands were injured, thousands of businesses were damaged or burned, causing over \$1 billion in damages. At the end of that week, Rodney King got in front of tv cameras and pleaded, "*Can we all just get along?*" It stopped the violence, but

we'll never forget the anger and violence that the actions of a few police caused, as a result of decades of police violence against African Americans, without accountability. We haven't solved the problem, and the consequences continue.

So today we have heard in John's gospel the words of Jesus, at the Last Supper, when he said, *"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."* How are we doing with this commandment today? Not so well?

This gospel is so needed today. We last heard these words during Holy Week, on Maundy Thursday, the night in which Jesus was betrayed. Same text, but such a different context, five Sundays after Easter! During Holy Week, we read this knowing that Judas was about to betray Jesus, and Peter would deny him before the night was over. Later that night Jesus would be put on trial and tortured, and in the morning he would be tried by Pontius Pilate, condemned and crucified by noon. The night would not end well for the disciples or for Jesus. But on that same evening Jesus washed each one of their feet, even Peter's and Judas's, because he loved them all, and had come to serve as an example. *"Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."*

So here are three scripture texts that are connected, and I'll tell you why. The first reading from Acts is a lesson in how God crosses the borders and walls we have built between us. It seems the apostles had heard that Gentiles (Greeks and Romans, not only Jews) were accepting the word of God in Christ Jesus. So Peter had a vision in which all the animals that he had always believed God had called unclean were now offered to him by God to eat. He hadn't understood, but then a Gentile, a Roman centurion named Cornelius sent for him, to ask that his whole household be baptized. Then Peter understood that God was offering Cornelius the same gift God had given to Peter when they believed in Jesus, so how could he hinder him and the Gentiles? God's mission of love to the Gentiles had now been revealed, with Jesus' intent that the whole world be saved. So all those things that we humans have thought God had forbidden have now become new possibilities for salvation, as God reaches out with love to other people we would never have considered! Everyone is redeemable! Even you and me!

The second reading from the book of Revelation is from another vision by John, who declared how *"I saw a new heaven and a new earth...that God will dwell with mortals, they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away...Behold, I am making all things new."* For those of us who have seen loved ones pass away and know the pain and grief of death, this is surely good news! Especially when seeing death is fresh in our eyes. But God promises a life to come where there will be no

more death or crying, or tears. In the midst of all the death around us, this is good news of hope and the promise of life to come!

So we come full circle to the gospel of John, and the Last Supper when Jesus washed his disciples' feet, and commanded them to "love one another as I have loved you." In a world of persecution by the Romans, threats from King Herod, and the accusations of the religious authorities who were jealous of his popularity, Jesus didn't call for revolt, but for his disciples to "*love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*"

Today our context doesn't seem much different than in Jesus' day. There are threats and violence all around us, and people are anxious and fearful. With rising poverty and homelessness in America, with migrants and asylum seekers at our southern border deported, in detention or separated from their families – even Lutheran pastors and theology students put in jail, with mass incarceration of African Americans, Native Americans and Latinos in our own country, school shootings and the sales of weapons all over the world by U.S. gun manufacturers, draconian abortion laws passed in some of our states and proposed in our own, that make criminals out of physicians and threaten rape victims instead of rapists, there are some signs of love that give us hope today. There are people of faith saying no to the evil darkness and yes to the light of love. There are individuals who show up in immigration court and accompany migrant minors through our Synod's AMMPARO ministry, there are churches that open their doors to provide sanctuary or a safe place to sleep in Project Home, there are churches and mosques that work together in ISAI AH to fight for racial and economic justice, for the freedom of immigrants to drive, for sensible gun laws, for paid family leave in our communities and state legislation. Churches like ours open our doors to support groups for our neighbors who are fighting chemical addictions and seeking recovery. For some of our neighbors, our hospitality is saving lives. This is love!

Once upon a time, in my lifetime, a church was identified by having a steeple and stained glass windows, an altar and an organ. Churches were known as places of worship where the faith of the Bible was passed on to children in Sunday school classes. Christians were challenged in sermons to lives of prayer and to follow the Ten Commandments in order to make themselves worthy of heaven. We were encouraged to be faithful by following the laws of the land. Much of this is still true, but today the Church and people of faith are known to the world by our compassion, mercy and love - not only for one another as Christians, but for our neighbors. We are known as followers of Jesus when we love our neighbors who don't share the same religious faith, who don't look like us, and by the risks we take on the behalf of those most vulnerable. God unlocks the doors of the Church for hospitality, and to "let us out" into the world. May God give us the strength to love like this, so that others may see the love of God in our acts of love. Amen.

We pray for pastor Betty Rendon, of Emaus Lutheran Church in Racine, Wisconsin, who was arrested and taken from her own home in Chicago by ICE agents and detained in a Chicago jail. Give freedom to her and all families who have been detained by ICE justice, after fleeing the violence in their home countries for safety or asylum in the United States. Hear us, O God.