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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/6/2007, Easter 5C¹
Acts 11:1-18, John 13:31-35

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Jesus said to his disciples] Little children, yet a little while I am with you... (John 13:33)

My wife Carol came home the other evening from a yoga class and found me sitting in the living room, holding a photograph in my hand, and rather staring off into space. She knew what I was thinking, what I was recollecting. It was a photograph of our two boys and me when they were pre-school age. We were sitting on the Pennsylvania lawn, leaning back, with the boys curled up in my lap. They were so cute, all skinny arms and legs, big eyes, big hearts, with the whole world ahead of them. Now they are taller than us and out and about, learning things and thinking things that probably go beyond my understanding. Where have all the years gone? I am thinking about change, with its peculiar mixture of pain and joy and hope.

In the night in which our Lord was betrayed, he spoke of change and of love. Our Gospel reading starts off with an ominous note: "When he had gone out..." Who? Judas, the Betrayer. Jesus knows what is afoot. He knows that his end is near. But Jesus does not try to flee, nor does he yield to panic concerning himself. Instead, his thoughts are only for his disciples and for how he can equip them for the changes now breaking upon them. The change approaches. It will soon be here. Men with lamps and swords and clubs will soon arrest him and lead him to his death. But that is a few hours away. Meanwhile, Jesus comforts his disciples, for they must soon go on in this world without him – at least without him in the good, plain manner they

have had him, when they walked with him and talked with him and counted him their Master and their Friend.

"Little children," he says. He calls them little children. He is nothing but sweetness to them. Jesus himself was still a young man – thirty-three, by tradition – and so maybe some of his disciples were older than himself. I think of Peter that way, for example, older than Jesus. Yet Jesus calls them "little children," and that they are, compared to his virtue and his maturity. But now they must make their way in this world without Jesus, for his end draws nigh, and Jesus means to equip them for their path henceforth.

This is the setting for his "new commandment" he gives his disciples:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. (John 13:34)

This is the farewell counsel and commandment Jesus gives his followers then and now: Amidst this world's changes and chances, set your soul toward love. Follow the example of Jesus himself, who in the night in which he was betrayed, both preached and practiced love.

There were alternatives, of course, for a farewell conversation. Jesus could have spoken of revenge for his coming death. He could have cautioned his disciples for their

¹ This sermon was much strengthened by my wife's sermon for this day. I liked Pastor Carol Fryer's sermon better than mine, so I melded them together as best I could.

own safety. He could have given them political recommendations about how to exploit his death. But none of this. He appeals to them simply to fight their way through to love.

Last evening when I read this Gospel story to Alfred Ernst, who is in the hospital, he was filled with awe and admiration for Jesus that when, by any normal perspective, our Lord's world was crashing down around him, Jesus still preached and practiced love. Alfred understood that he rests in good hands when he rests in Jesus.

And so it is for each of us. There is a phrase in the evening hymn "Abide with Me" that might strike a chord with you at this time in your life:

change and decay in all around I
see;
O thou who changest not, abide
with me. (LBW 272, vs. 3)

If not "decay," then certainly "change" all around we see. Little children grow up and head out on their own. You look up and see that things have changed. Your profession has changed, your health has changed, the spring in your step has changed, many of your friends have moved on, either to other parts of the country or on to the Lord. The lesson of this morning's Gospel is love. As you face life's changes, strive even more to be people of love.

So, that is the first part of this sermon. The other part concerns the extension of such love. One way to think of this morning's Bible readings is that they explore the great breadth of the love Jesus commands and of the good news of Easter. Just how BIG is Easter? We know that the resurrection of Jesus filled Mary Magdalene with great joy. The disciples too were glad when the risen Jesus appeared unto them. St. Peter knows of a joy in the Lord that is "unspeakable and full of glory." (1 Peter 1:8) And many a white-haired Christian in

ages past and even today could testify after a life lived following Jesus that such a life has been a sweet life, and the Gospel of his resurrection is the most precious thought they have. That would be a lot of people, from Mary Magdalene to the apostles to the saints of old and the saints of our own time: a multitude of people touched by Easter, encouraged and strengthened by the resurrection of our Lord.

And yet, would that multitude of believers exhaust the meaning of Easter? The communion of saints on earth and in heaven is a vast number. If they were a crowd, they would stretch acre after acre, square mile after square mile — the saints of the Lord. And yet, when the Bible thinks of multitudes, it does not think so small as a crowd, even a vast crowd, but rather of numberless things: the stars in the sky and the grains of sand on the shore line. The extent of God's people is to be without number. So, just how BIG is Easter?

Another way to phrase the question is this. In the night in which he was betrayed, when Jesus gave his new commandment that his disciples should love even as he has loved, what is the proper range of application for this new commandment? Are his disciples to love simply "one another" with a love akin to his own? Or are they to love with a longing for the whole world.

That is, this morning's Bible readings explore the traditional predicate of the Church known as the Church's "catholicity." We believe in "one, holy, *catholic*, and apostolic church." This morning we explore that third predicate — the catholic nature of the church.

What you heard in childhood about the catholic nature of the church is true. It does not mean the "Roman Catholic" nature of the church, but rather the "universal" nature of the church. The church's catholicity refers to its eager expectation of bringing every soul on this earth to Jesus. Red or yellow, black or white — it matters not. Nor does wealth nor poverty, virtue nor crime. Every one on the

face of this earth is welcome into the church, and the Lord of the church grieves if any are left out.

This is the context for this morning's reading from Acts 11 about St. Peter's report on his preaching the Gospel to the household of Cornelius. Cornelius was a Roman centurion. We are speaking of a Gentile, not a Jew. And we are speaking of one of the grandest moments in the life of the early Church — that moment when the early Church discovered that she was meant to embrace the whole world. We are discussing that great leading of the Holy Spirit by which the Church came to understand that she was meant to be BIG — not just the twelve apostles, not just the three thousand people of Jerusalem converted to Christ on Pentecost Sunday, but also all of humanity.

Now, it had been a notorious rumor about Jesus that he supped with sinners. He is a "friend of sinners" — so the righteous folk had murmured about Jesus. This tendency of Jesus to befriend tax collectors, prostitutes, and other notorious sinners probably contributed to ultimate rejection by Israel's leaders and to his death.

Still, this much could be said about Jesus: At least the sinners he befriended tended to be Jews. "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." These were precious words spoken to a woman caught in adultery. But at least they were words spoken to a Jewish woman caught in adultery. In that sense, the life and practice of Jesus were not revolutionary. Even his critics would have to admit that in the day to day conduct of his life, Jesus continued the old, old conviction that salvation was for the children of Abraham.

But Peter, bless him, has preached salvation to the Gentiles. And so, Peter is summoned home to the other apostles gathered there in Jerusalem. The other disciples probably thought to themselves, "That Peter! We can dress him up, but we can't take him out in public. The man is so impetuous. Now look what he has done. He has preached the Gospel to Gentiles!" So, they summon him home. They mean to examine him and talk sense to him.

Only, when they hear his story, they come to understand that Peter had been right, and they had been wrong. What Peter did was by the inspiration and leading of the Holy Spirit, and that same Holy Spirit had fallen upon the household of Cornelius in confirmation that Peter had done well.

Again, how BIG is Easter? It is vast. It is immense. It is meant to rule every nook and cranny of your heart, one by one, and it is meant to rule every soul on the face of this earth. Somewhere in the vast number, you belong, now don't you? Easter is meant for you, whether you be a Jew a Gentile, a saint or a sinner.

When life seems as if it is a tornado roaring toward you, when the changes in life leave you bewildered or perhaps even discouraged, remember then the parting counsel of Jesus to his followers that they are to love as he has loved, and that is a BIG love, a universal love, a love that sets the soul with goodwill toward everyone in the city and upon this earth — including that most excellent benevolence of inviting them to Jesus in his holy church, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.