

Sermon for 15 May 2022 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Fifth Sunday of Easter/Heritage Sunday

Scriptures: Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148 (UM861); Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

### ***“Absotootely”***

Can you close your eyes and think of a moment when something you really hated hadn't happened? When you felt suddenly at ease about everything? When all the negatives just slid into the background and you could breathe free, maybe deeply?

I see that in this part of these Great Fifty Days of Easter. We're being asked to think how much of our trouble is a mind thing. Where old habits we'd only realize if we worked with a psychotherapist, thought patterns stemming from 'way back in our development, still influenced our reactions and how we regarded ourselves and our closest relationships, how we meet uncertainty, how we deal with loss ... or maybe how overly-optimistic we are, to the exasperation of our partners and even our children?

This first scripture, with its dramatic insistence that some of the deepest identities of being Jewish weren't as tight-bound as most of them ... of us, in the case of would-be Christians who'd somehow come in contact with Jesus or his followers ... this Cornelius story is a real game-changer for the first thinkers and practicers ... Totally Jewish as he was, Jesus was also a new being, in the sense that the founder of a new religion can be thought of. Both in the Gospel of Matthew .. sometimes called the church's Gospel, in the sense that it specifies more things that establish a new institution than Mark, or even Luke, and hence is the first of the three Gospels to be used in our three-year lectionary cycle ... both in Matthew, and certainly in John, which we're using these first few Sundays after Easter... John, where Jesus is never unsure of himself, and nothing ever happens to him that wasn't planned from the beginning of time and totally in God's plan ... it is clear that neither Rome nor Abraham has the last word about reality. Christ does. A human figure exemplifies life for us. Other great faiths have real problems with that, as we all know. We have trouble as well, if we're honest. We used to say in seminary that church history was the biggest test of faith, because Christianity's self-assurance took over so many customs and deeply held insights that one could never be sure, after awhile, it wasn't all in the aim of power and control.

That's what I have to insist on this Sunday. Absolutely, Gentiles can be saved. The Holy Spirit can overwhelm them just as it overwhelmed Hebrews. All the pig-headedness of the scribes and Pharisees can take over our fallen natures and make Native American spirituality powerless, for example. I just listened to the author of a new book last week who spoke movingly about how a specific criminal in indigenous history was held guilty,

but essentially guided to new life and integration into the community in a way that seemed incomprehensible to the American colonists. The whole society was deemed responsible for the guilty individual's reconstruction, and justice included an opportunity for restitution and eventual re-integration quite foreign to our whole system of jurisprudence.

But back to the upbeat side of this teaching time after Easter: Those times of bliss I asked us to recall and learn to use constructively in the midst of all the darkness of life and politics ...they really have great power, not only for us individually, but for society and history. I keep saying this because so much anger and depression ... such plain meanness ... marks our time. And it just isn't true. Life has more open doors than we tend to think, these days, when we're jittery and lonesome and cut off from so much that, for all its prejudice and ignorance, had a lot of stability and common sense and just plain politeness we just don't see these days. Psalm 148 belts it out in example after example: God's the greatest. God's creation is the best. Turn any way and see how beautiful, and trustworthy, and just plain incredible the world and all that's in it are. That means of course Cornelius can get the spirit. Of course he can join the rest of us hopeful, God-seeking folks, regardless of his skin color or military training or local authority .. or lack of it.

Back to my favorite theme: That's why church is always trying new things. It's our job to test the waters. For all the smallness of our size and our lack of social power compared to Christianity in the recent past and in the character of America, we've got a good thing going ... or as Jesus puts it, "they'll know you're my disciples if you love one another.

Absotootely.

Amen.