

Where Do We Go From Here?, a sermon in response to Acts 11:1-18 and John 13:31-35 by Rev. Scot McCachren at the First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton, May 19, 2019. (*Originally formatted to assist oral presentation, including irregular punctuation.*)

After 26 years as parents, Linda and I *still* feel like we are at a time of transition, even though we've pretty much had the house to ourselves for a couple of years now. We watched our beautiful daughters grow into young women. +++ It's been a **long time** since they've come into our room at night because they're scared or thirsty. +++ I'm no longer asked to drive them to a friend's house at 11:00 pm – I never thought I'd miss *that*. +++ But, of course, I do. +++ I miss being the first option when they need or want *anything*. They are so self-reliant now – one with her own church and engaged to be married – the other on the verge of graduating college. +++ As parents, at some point, you are forced come to grips with the fact that your work with them is pretty much done, and the house will always quieter than it used to be.

It makes me think about a song that gets stuck in my head sometimes – I'm sure most of you know it – “Games People Play” by the Alan Parsons Project... “Where do we go from here now that all of the children have grown up? And how do we spend our lives if there's no one to lend us a hand.”

To young adults, it feels like they are at the beginning of something – to their parents it can feel like we are at the END of something - when the house is quiet – and I know it will **remain** quiet for the foreseeable future, not just for an hour, or an evening, or a day – sometimes I start thinking: “Now What? Where **Do** We Go From Here?” What's the **next** chapter? +++ Now, ***I'm*** talking as a parent because that's what ***I*** know, it has been my experience,... but **everyone** faces it sometimes... +++ When you suddenly realize that things have changed – routines you were accustomed to – rhythms you relied on – ***that will never be the same again.*** – +++ And life goes on, whether you're ready or not:: sudden loss,... an unexpected career change,... an unplanned move to a new community,... .. broken relationships... +++ You are bewildered – and you wonder, “**How do I know how to move forwards when things have changed so much?**”

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Both of our readings this morning show us people in this situation. In John, the disciples have just sat down with Jesus at what will be their Last Supper together, and he springs the news on them – “Little children, I am with you only a little longer.” In Acts, Peter is doing his best to be the Rock that Jesus had called him to be, spreading the Good News and building the church – **but the way is not always clear now that Jesus has gone away.** +++ They all must have been bewildered without him – it felt like the END of something, though they actually stood at the START of something brand new.

This morning, I'd like to look at each of these texts a little closer, asking if God gave them the direction when they needed it – if the Lord told them “*where to go from here.*” Then, we'll ask if the texts give us what **WE** need from God, to know what ***we*** should do next. And where might it take **US?**

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In our Gospel lesson, things are about to change drastically and quickly for the disciples. As they sat there, ready to eat after a long day, everything had seemed so normal. Imagine yourself as a disciple at the Last Supper. Jesus has just washed your feet and taught ***you*** to follow his example by washing ***each other's*** feet. He said, “*you also should do as I have done to you.*” You're feeling pretty cozy – pretty comfortable. There's plenty of food – plenty of wine... You couldn't have known what he was preparing you for – that something really big was about to happen. You couldn't know that by washing your feet and serving you, he was **teaching** you how to walk **without him** by your side – to continue doing his work and preaching Good News **on your own.** +++ Then... it happens... he rocks your world in today's passage, saying “Little children, I am with you ***only a little longer.*** You will look for me... Where I am going, you cannot come.” And, then things begin to quickly unravel for you.

After Jesus finishes speaking to you at the Last Supper, he is betrayed, arrested and condemned to death – ***all by the end of the next chapter.*** +++ then, he is crucified and buried in the chapter after that.++++ Have you ever

wondered how that felt? To be a disciple, following Jesus, ... *sometimes* threatened by the outside world but always safe in his love, being committed to Jesus' work, to taking his message to the world? Then, in less than 24 hours – he is taken from you, suffers an unjust and violent death, and is just... *gone*... These are Good Friday feelings - you don't know anything about Easter yet.

What's going on? ...Everything is changed!... “Where Do We Go From Here?”... You will not be able to crawl away and hide – you have work to do – Good News to share – a church to build.+++ But right now, ...that all seems so far away. ...The house is quiet. ...What's your next chapter?... Your next move??? +++ ... How do you know how to move forward when things have changed so much?

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It seems like an END. But, it's a BEGINNING. +++ +++ Let's *rewind* the scene, back to today's passage, to see if there's *something else* there that might help... You are at the Supper... Jesus has washed your feet... Judas just left the room to do something, but you don't know what he's up to. ... At that moment, just when you are about to need it the most, Jesus tells you what you will need to do. ... He tells you where you will go from here... He gives you a New Commandment that will be the key to your future – and the future of the world. “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 seems like a simple commandment, and it is – (though it can be very hard to follow). But it does provide what we need – IF we can hold onto it. +++ +++ “Yes – yes, of course,” they might have thought – “We've followed Jesus, we've learned from him, we've seen his example. We can love. We can BE love.” +++ Did they get the direction they needed to continue? Yes! Jesus did not just give them a command – he gave them Strength – Strength to build a church. He gave them Hope – Hope that they could walk in his footsteps. Hope that *his* light could shine through them forever. Strength and Hope – arising from sharing the Love of Christ.

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In our passage from Acts, Peter finds himself in the middle of a controversy. So far, the Apostles had begun the Church only among Jewish converts. In reality, up until now, Christianity had really been a sect of Judaism. All of the Old Testament laws were a core part of Christianity, and that included the rules against unclean foods (what we would call non-kosher) and the requirement that males be circumcised. Many leaders in the movement thought it should remain that way – especially back in Jerusalem, where there was a heavy Jewish population. But, Peter is not in Jerusalem and he is finding that the Good News of Jesus Christ cannot be restricted just to Jews. As the Church spread into the empire, many Gentiles were drawn to Christ but they didn't see why they should have to change the way they eat – and they *definitely* didn't want to be circumcised.

In the passage immediately before today's reading, Peter speaks to a group of Gentiles and “the Holy Spirit fell upon ALL who heard the word” and they began speaking in tongues. The *Jewish* believers who saw it were astounded that this could happen.: “Wait a minute! WE are the chosen people... Why would our God give the gift of the Spirit to people who are not of Israel? People like that are unworthy,... *aren't they?*” And then, Peter ordered that these Gentiles should all be baptized. +++ But now..., in *today's* text, he is criticized for even being there in the first place. “Why did you [even] go to uncircumcised men and eat with them” in the first place? +++ There's so much confusion about who deserves to receive the Gospel, and it's so frustrating.

I can imagine Peter remembering how things had been different when Jesus was there with him. Jesus always knew what to do next. He was never confused. He always knew the perfect thing to say. Peter was wondering: “How do I know how to move forwards when things have changed so much?” Where Do I Go From Here? +++ And then... perhaps, ... in this difficult time,... Peter remembered what Jesus had said at the Last Supper – his “New Commandment”.: “Love as I love.” +++ Simply to love – everyone – not to judge, or to set rules – and certainly not to deem some people more worthy than others to hear the Word and join the Body of Christ. +++ Jesus' love was *universal* - it was clearly focused on the *outcast*, those who were called sinners, the

poor and the sick. +++ And, it is through THAT kind of love that “everyone will know that you are my disciples,” he had said. **It is not restrictive, but an all-encompassing... love.**

Now, months later, in Acts, Peter is given a vision by the Holy Spirit to help him sort things out. In his vision, the Spirit commands *him* to eat forbidden foods. When Peter tries to refuse, the voice answers, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” +++ And, *he gets his answer* – **The love and legacy of Jesus is for all creation** – including people who do not follow the Hebrew Laws:: – those that aren’t part of *OUR* group – People who aren’t just like me. There should be NO barriers, NO ethnic, religious, cultural, or personal restrictions. **Nothing** disqualifies anyone from the Word of God. +++ +++ From that moment, the church grew into the Gentile world. First with Peter, but it was Paul who *really* became the minister to the Empire. The Word came to Rome – it came to the world – and, eventually, it came to US – **Because Peter got the direction he needed from the Holy Spirit.**

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And what about us? “Where Do **We** Go From Here” when the path before us is muddy? +++ We live in a new and challenging world. Technology has improved our communications and made the world smaller – but it also threatens our privacy. +++ A smaller and smaller number of people control the world’s wealth – while more and more people are hungry and cannot afford a home. +++ We struggle for the wisdom to balance the needs of the poor vs. the rights of the wealthy and corporations. +++ Racism still divides our nation to the extent that our neighbors cry out for us to remember that their *lives matter*. +++ Our *own denomination* continues to divide itself over how we should respond to love shared between some of our brothers and sisters in Christ. +++ Violence threatens us at home and abroad as cultures clash, and the world’s religions *seem* to have irreconcilable differences.

So, How do we know how to move forward when things have changed so much? There are no easy answers to these problems, and I won’t pretend that I have the solutions. But, we DO know *some* things:: **We know that God prepared us with the tools to respond with the love of Christ:**

- From the Last Supper, Jesus *calls out* to us with his commandment: “**Love one another.** Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” It’s exactly that easy – and exactly that hard.
- From Acts, the Holy Spirit *calls out* to us: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” We are all created holy and in God’s image. **Christians must NOT** look at those who are different from themselves and ask, “Why would OUR God move through people like that?” Do *we* criticize leaders like Peter, who welcome **those people** into the church with open arms?

Where DO we go from here? +++ Do we get the direction we need from God? YES! The **GOOD NEWS** is that after two thousand years since Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, **he still gives us what we need to move forward.** The Holy Spirit continues to move in our hearts and among us when we gather as God’s people and read God’s Word – and directs us to offer unqualified love ...with open arms.

God’s love is *universal*, and we are commanded to love *universally*. As Paul writes, “There is no Jew or Greek, Slave or Free, male or female.” We are commanded to Love as Christ Loves us – but not just to love each other. Not just within this church – or among Christians – or in our Nation. We are called to Love *Everyone* – and to share the Good News of Christ with the World. *Love* is his legacy – **we ...** are his voice.

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