

Acts 11:1-18

1 The apostles and the brothers and sisters throughout Judea heard that even the Gentiles had welcomed God's word. 2 When Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him. 3 They accused him, "You went into the home of the uncircumcised and ate with them!"

4 Step-by-step, Peter explained what had happened. 5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying when I had a visionary experience. In my vision, I saw something like a large linen sheet being lowered from heaven by its four corners. It came all the way down to me. 6 As I stared at it, wondering what it was, I saw four-legged animals—including wild beasts—as well as reptiles and wild birds.[a] 7 I heard a voice say, 'Get up, Peter! Kill and eat!' 8 I responded, 'Absolutely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' 9 The voice from heaven spoke a second time, 'Never consider unclean what God has made pure.' 10 This happened three times, then everything was pulled back into heaven. 11 At that moment three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea arrived at the house where we were staying. 12 The Spirit told me to go with them even though they were Gentiles. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered that man's house. 13 He reported to us how he had seen an angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and summon Simon, who is known as Peter. 14 He will tell you how you and your entire household can be saved.' 15 When I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, just as the Spirit fell on us in the beginning. 16 I remembered the Lord's words: 'John will baptize with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 If God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, then who am I? Could I stand in God's way?"

18 Once the apostles and other believers heard this, they calmed down. They praised God and concluded, "So then God has enabled Gentiles to change their hearts and lives so that they might have new life."

Psalms 148

Praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord from heaven!

Praise God on the heights!

2 Praise God, all of you who are his messengers!

Praise God, all of you who comprise his heavenly forces!

3 Sun and moon, praise God!

All of you bright stars, praise God!

4 You highest heaven, praise God!

Do the same, you waters that are above the sky!

5 Let all of these praise the Lord's name

because God gave the command and they were created!

6 God set them in place always and forever.

God made a law that will not be broken.

7 Praise the Lord from the earth,

you sea monsters and all you ocean depths!

8 Do the same, fire and hail, snow and smoke,

stormy wind that does what God says!

9 Do the same, you mountains, every single hill,

fruit trees, and every single cedar!
10 Do the same, you animals—wild or tame—
you creatures that creep along and you birds that fly!
11 Do the same, you kings of the earth and every single person,
you princes and every single ruler on earth!
12 Do the same, you young men—young women too!—
you who are old together with you who are young!
13 Let all of these praise the Lord's name
because only God's name is high over all.
Only God's majesty is over earth and heaven.
14 God raised the strength[a] of his people,
the praise of all his faithful ones—
that's the Israelites,
the people who are close to him.

Revelation 21:1-6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 I heard a loud voice from the throne say, "Look! God's dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." 5 Then the one seated on the throne said, "Look! I'm making all things new." He also said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." 6 Then he said to me, "All is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will freely give water from the life-giving spring.

John 13:31-35

31 When Judas was gone, Jesus said, "Now the Human One[b] has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. 32 If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify the Human One[c] in himself and will glorify him immediately. 33 Little children, I'm with you for a little while longer. You will look for me—but, just as I told the Jewish leaders, I also tell you now—'Where I'm going, you can't come.'

34 "I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. 35 This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other."

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

Preaching about love almost feels an absurd task. Talk about love appears everywhere in our culture, so of course we all already know everything about it. We know what it means to love because Ross and Rachael made it work on Friends on TV, because Peter Parker's transition to Spider Man came out of his care for his dead Uncle Ben, because Anne Hathaway's Fantine sacrifices everything, body and soul, to care her daughter Cosette in *Les Mis*. And it doesn't stop there. Listen to pop radio from any era, and a veritable plethora of experts on love appear. Whether Mama Cass, or the Supremes, or Van Halen, or John Legend, or Taylor Swift or Justin Bieber or Beyonce, everyone seems to know just what love is, and tells us in three and a half minutes all that we need to know.

Of course, we know that's not actually true. The perspectives of love that we see in media and hear in music are just that, limited perspectives. Yet, we live as though they're the real thing, the full monty, and we don't need to know anything else about it. Why would we need God to teach us about love when the Biebs and Beyoncé are our gurus of choice? We assume we know what love is, what love does, and so teaching or preaching on it seems to just add to the clamor of voices.

But here's the question I have: which one of these versions of love ever raised someone from the dead? Not allegorically, not some nice metaphor. Which one of these loves brings life from death?

One of the hardest moments I faced in my life was the realization that I was bulimic. When you have an eating disorder, you think everything is under control. You think you're in control, that you can stop any time you want to

quit. That it's just temporary behavior. That's not, however, the case. Eating disorders are actually much more like addictions than you might first realize. I still remember the place and time – it was my college cafeteria at lunch – when I realized my body was rejecting the food I'd just eaten, whether I wanted to throw it up or not. I was on a trajectory of death and I couldn't stop myself. How can life come out of a situation like that?

Two friends, two women who I'd dated at various times throughout college, intervened. Though they had every right to write me off, to hold against me the negative ends to our relationships and the damage done to their lives by that disorder, instead they stepped in and forced me to see that I needed help, that I needed counseling, that I needed to find a way to stop. Their care for me wasn't about a romantic relationship at that time. It was about spinning me away from a valley of death's shadow and instead pointing

me toward abundant life. It was love, and it looked nothing like a movie screen. It sounded nothing like a pop song.

Today, in the Easter season, the season of resurrection, we hear Jesus tells us: "Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other." This doesn't mean buying someone's affection with diamonds or season tickets. It doesn't mean just nice feelings or emotional connections. Loving like Jesus is stepping in and caring even when, or especially when, we don't feel like it, when other people don't deserve it, when it's hard to have affection. Loving like Jesus means intervening, directing, and assisting the people in our lives toward life. God's love first raised Jesus from the dead, and in Jesus' love we find our own resurrections.

That's the radical thing about the life of Jesus.

Remember that this is a God who **chose** to become human,

not out of mushy feelings, but because love means changing our life situations to care for others. This is a God who **chose** to heal the sick, forgive the sinful, welcome the outcast and seek the lost, not out of obligation, but because love means doing what we can to alleviate the suffering of others, to return the lonely to community, to include rather than exclude. This is a God who **chose** to follow the path of the cross, not out of some emotive sensationalism, but because true love means true sacrifice. Love, Christian love, looks like that. The love that Jesus calls for us to live is the love that Jesus lived for us.

That's one of the reasons that this passage from Acts just gets to me. Peter expects that he knows what love looks like – after all, he walked with Jesus through life, death, and resurrection – but even he's surprised at how far God goes to love others. Peter expects that there are limits on God's love, that Jesus' welcome can't come to Gentiles, until he

sees unmistakably before his eyes that they too have the Holy Spirit, even though they're not following the law. Even the law of God is overwhelmed by the love of God, and so Peter says, "If God gave these Gentiles the same gift he gave Jews who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, then who am I? How can I stand in God's way?" The love of God pushes us beyond boundaries, beyond expectations, even beyond obligations, and looks instead always to bless someone else, to welcome someone else, to live life well with others. So often, we find ourselves standing at a crossroads of where we think love and faithfulness are in competition. But Peter found himself in the same place, and realized that faithfulness to God is God's inclusive love. Being faithful, or scriptural, aren't in competition with the kind of love that lifts up outcasts, that includes outsiders, that supports those in need, that welcomes strangers. That love is the very definition of faithfulness.

When Jesus tells us that others will know we're Christians by this very particular kind of love, he's also omitting the other options. They won't know we're Christians by our rules and how well we use them to keep people out or divide people up. They won't know we're Christians by our lust or our addiction to relationships. They won't know we're Christians by our wealth, accumulation of stuff or if we wear the "right clothes." It's not even about praying the sinner's prayer, or reading your bible, or being baptized, or how often you take communion, or being a church member in good standing. Jesus doesn't prescribe any of those things to share the Gospel. Instead, Jesus tells us one thing. They'll know you're Christians by how you love one another.

Jesus frames this not as an option but as an identity. Love is how people will know we're disciples Christ. This isn't about bragging. It's not a media blitz or marketing ploy. Love, this kind of active, self-sacrificial, others-focused love is

the kind of change God calls us to live in the world. It's meant to be shared, not to sell someone love, but to offer it as a free gift, as a sign of that grace, because this love brings new life. This love brings resurrection. Of course, we learn what this love looks like through prayer and meditation, through reading scripture, through encountering the Holy Spirit in our baptism and meeting Jesus in communion. We learn that love in church communities like this one because, well, sometimes it's hard to love.

But that's just it. The gift of the people who make up the church, of the sacraments that we participate in every week, of our opportunities to serve the New River Valley, is that we learn to love one another. We learn resurrection together. Church is meant to be a community of learning and growing. The old adage is true: It's not a country club

for saints, it's hospital for sinners. And I would add, it's a graduate school for sinners too.

One of the reasons I'm passionate about campus ministry is that, in these educational settings, people are willing to admit that they need to learn. For the NRCC students whose papers I'm grading right now, some of it's learning about religion, some of it's learning about grammar or how citations work. For the students who meet weekly at RU's campus, it's learning about our Lutheran way of being Christian, learning more about scripture. But more fundamentally, more personally, it's about those times when students come after class, or outside of Bible study, and say, "I know I need to do this better," or just, "I need help." Just in the past few weeks, we've had a few students come to these places of deep need and, through their own decisions, decide to speak their honest need for support

from others into our small group. And, I'm proud to tell you, these students responded in love.

This vulnerability, combined with a culture of education, helps us to become this kind of hospital and school where we learn to love, where we heal from hurt, and try again to live the love of Jesus. In other words, campus ministry helps to highlight how we learn to live resurrection, how we, sometimes even despite ourselves, show the love of Jesus to the world so that they say, "Well, there's certainly something different about them. Maybe they're Christians. Or maybe they're crazy. But either way, they're definitely not normal.

No, there's nothing normal about God's love. Nothing you'd find in a pop song or a movie. God's love is the kind of love that welcomes Gentiles even though they break God's law. God's love doesn't need to get even, but instead turns the other cheek. God's love runs to rescue lost

sheep and leaps to embrace misbehaving children. God's love doesn't demand blind obedience, but welcomes questions. Holds us amidst doubt. Allows us to find our own way, even when that way grieves God.

That's why this place needs to be a school, and a hospital. That's hard stuff, dangerous stuff, that we need to learn. Sometimes we'll fall and hurt ourselves. Sometimes, we'll hurt others too. This needs to be a safe place both for experimentation in love and a safe place to let love heal us when we've gone astray. This is what resurrected life does! It takes this from a building to a community that seeks the best for others rather than ourselves. They'll know we're Christians if we love like Jesus. Prince really was right when he said, "Dearly beloved, we're gathered together today to get through this thing called life." We're gathered together to love, and to learn to love, with this life that God gave to us. Amen.