

Easter 5C, St. John's Olney, 19 May 2019

The Reverend Henry P. McQueen

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

S.D.G.

As I began to explore the questions posed by these readings I remembered watching a video some 12 years ago; it was The Last Lecture given by Randy Pausch. Carnegie Mellon University had a lecture series entitled "The Last Lecture"; the premise of the program was that professors were asked to give a lecture as if this was the last time that they would ever address a class. Professor Pausch gave a very compelling lecture full of life lessons, the audience was engaged and then he gave the first of several "gotcha" moments.

Apparently he was known for his "gotcha" moments during lectures. After imparting his wisdom he shared that this was indeed his last lecture because he had recently been diagnosed with advanced pancreatic cancer. Continuing to speak he then shared his second "gotcha" – this lecture was not intended for those in the lecture hall, this lecture was being recorded so that his young children could hear it when they grew older.

Jesus, through John's Gospel, is also sharing parting advice, in this case with his own little children, his disciples. Jesus tells his disciples: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." Hearing these words it is easy to see how Presiding Bishop Curry so often says "If it isn't love, it isn't Jesus." We are to love one another as he loved us. God loves abundantly, and we are to do the same.

This would seem to be all we need to know, and in many ways it is. But taken in isolation this verse could be viewed as only pointing to the small group of disciples who were present at the time. But reading scripture demands that we look at the entirety of scripture, not an isolated passage. Today in our readings, there are several other supporting passages to better understand Jesus' message of love.

Saint John writes in Revelation *"I saw a new heaven and a new earth... And I saw the holy city... coming down out of heaven from God... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God'... And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'"*

It was in the book of Exodus that Moses met with God and said ‘who shall I say sent me?’ God said ‘I am who I am. Tell them I am sent you.’ And that is the beauty of this passage, it does not say I made all things new, or I will make all things new. It says I am making all things new – it is in the present tense, it is happening now; if only we would get out of the way and let it happen.

Peter, in the Acts of the Apostles, got out of the way and welcomed the new heaven and the new earth. Steeped in learning and tradition, Peter initially shuns the idea of spreading the good news to those outside of the faith, to the unclean. But in a vision, God tells Peter ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ Peter’s love of God led him to forgo tradition and teaching and he baptized those that others considered unclean. He created a path for the new heaven and the new earth; Peter said “who was I that I could hinder God?”

Just recently a letter was published from the spiritual leader of Georgetown Visitation School, a Roman Catholic preparatory school. It had been the practice of the school to not permit alumni announcements in the school publications regarding same gender marriage. This letter overturned that practice, and it reads in part: *“The Roman Catholic Church is clear in its teaching on same-sex marriages. But, it is equally clear in its teaching that we are all children of God, that we each have dignity and are worthy of respect and love... As I have prayed over this contradiction, I keep returning to this choice: we can focus on Church teaching... or we can focus on... the Gospel commandment of love. We know from history - including very recent history - that the Church, in its humanity, makes mistakes. Yet, through the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, it learns and grows. And so, we choose the Gospel commandment of love.”*

From our perspective what seems like a simple act of inclusion took great courage and faith from the Mother Superior; she truly loves God and all that God has created, like Peter she stood up and said “who was I that I could hinder God?”

I remember about 30 years ago when Diane and I were living in downtown Lancaster; our friends all knew where we lived because we were next door to the most sought after bakery in the city. It is not a particularly dangerous city, though there can be exceptions. One evening a frantic knock on the door and ringing of our doorbell occurred. When I opened the door there was standing before me a stranger, who asked hurriedly, if Diane lived here. Recognizing that he was in distress I urged him to come in and Diane immediately welcomed our unexpected guest. After a little while when he calmed down our guest shared that he, as

a gay man, was being chased by a street gang who was intent upon doing him bodily harm. Fortunately he remembered the bakery next to our home and he sought refuge, a safe haven; thanks be to God we were there to welcome him.

There are few here today who would not have acted exactly as we did, we would all have welcomed into our homes someone who was in danger, we would all have provided refuge; after all, who are we to hinder God.

Sadly, our brothers and sisters and their children, who face grave danger in their own land, are frantically knocking on the door of our southern border only to be told that no one is welcome. God is trying to create a new heaven and a new earth but we are putting up walls; and I have to ask who are we to hinder God.

In our humanity we make mistakes; yet, through the love and grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit we learn and grow, so that we can choose the Gospel commandment of love.

God created a beautiful earth, full of abundant and diverse life. God created it and said, it is good, very good. And in our humanity we made mistakes, we valued profit and convenience over creation. Creation is knocking frantically at our door, only to be told that few are listening. God is trying to create a new heaven and a new earth, but we are building a new parking lot; and I have to ask who are we to hinder God.

In our humanity we make mistakes; yet, through the love and grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit we learn and grow, so that we can choose the Gospel commandment of love.

God loves abundantly, so that we can love abundantly. To follow Jesus as a disciple is to act as he acts, it is to love as he loves, and it is to be loved as he is loved. Love creates a pathway for the new heaven and the new earth that God is creating. All around us, every day, choices are made that either hinder God or uphold the Gospel commandment of love. And I say, who are we to hinder God and the way of love.

Amen,