

5th Sunday of Easter
May 19th, 2019
Rev. Michael S. Plank
Hudson Falls, NY

“Opposing God”

Text: *Acts 11:17: “So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?”*

Scripture Lesson: Acts 11:1-18

Proposition: I propose to experientially show that the myth of scarcity is a lie, especially when it comes to the magnificence and abundance of a thing like Love, to the end that hearers will open their hearts more fully to one another.

Prayer for Illumination: God of Abundance, we pray for you to share a portion of your boundless wisdom with us as we hear your Word this morning. Let it speak to us, and help us to understand. We pray this in your name. Amen.

Scriptural Context: The story of the Book of Acts as it chronicles the beginnings of the Christian Church is a story in which those first followers of Jesus say: “The community is *this* big,” and the Holy Spirit says, “No. Bigger.” Listen for God’s Word here.

We announced a couple of weeks ago now that Lauren is pregnant. It’s really exciting for us. It was only kind of a secret, since we had told Harvey, and he kept that secret about as well as a 4-year-old can keep any secret, which means any time he wasn’t getting attention he would just shout out: “Do you know that my mom is having a new baby?” Almost everybody has been wonderful and excited and supportive.

But people say weird things too, as I’m sure you know. Pregnancy is this weird time where a lot of people feel like it’s perfectly fine to touch the belly of the pregnant woman in a way that you would never dream of

doing to someone who wasn't pregnant. I had a friend, who when she was pregnant and people would come up and touch her belly, would look deep into their eyes and put her hand on their bellies too. People demand to see her belly. People talk about how it looked like she was putting on weight. Weird stuff. People can be weird about pregnancy.

But not one single person has said, "What a shame, that now with two kids, you'll only be able to love Harvey half as much." That would be a ridiculous thing to say. It's crazy to think that when you have a second child, the love for your first child now has to be split so there's only half for each of them. It's obviously not true. And yet, we feel that way about so many other relationships in our lives.

We got a cat last year from our neighbor. He had to get rid of her and so we took her last fall. She's an indoor-outdoor cat in warm weather, and so she's been back on the prowl again lately. And the other day while I was mowing she walked across the road and lay down in his driveway. And I felt a quick pang of annoyance! I tried to figure out and say "Why am I annoyed about that? Surely, I am evolved and mature enough not to feel jealousy when the cat that we inherited spends a minute rubbing up against the person that used to own her." But apparently not! It was laughable. But if we can feel those kinds of things about our pets, how much more do we feel them about people?

When players switch the teams they play for people feel betrayed. When members go to another church, we feel hurt. When someone leaves your company, your business, your school, your workplace for another one, you feel left behind. When your friends have other friends that they choose to spend time with instead of spending time with you, or when your sister or your son chooses their partner or spouse over spending time with you, or when your spouse has other friends – especially if they're friends that are a gender of interest – it can be tough.

And then we really do feel like the love they have must be finite and limited, and if they're sharing it with someone else that means that there's less to share with us. And so we get jealous and angry and bitter. And we run love-tests on each other, where we maybe schedule a phone call to connect, and make sure they know that they are to call us, and then when they don't call on time... *gotcha!* Failed the test! I knew it! Or when they're late with a birthday card, or they miss a dinner, or they change their minds about a plan... You failed the love-test! And sometimes when you can draw it out to the absurd like that and make light of it, it lets you lower your own defenses enough to see where you hang on to those petty jealousies. Or at least it does for me.

But sometimes you get too deep, and it's tough to see your way out. And then that jealousy turns into resentment and into bitterness and it eats you alive. And make no mistake, that is what is at play here in this story from our reading.

Chapter 10 of the Book of Acts, that comes immediately before this, is the story of this Roman centurion named Cornelius who is visited by an angel who tells him to send to Joppa for Peter. The next day, while Peter is praying, he gets hungry and has this vision of a sheet dropping down from heaven and filled with animals. These animals are not kosher and for a devout Jew like Peter would be like you seeing a sheet full of skunks and possums and coyotes and lizards... all animals that are fine, but you wouldn't make a connection to them solving your problem. It wouldn't be like being starving and seeing a cow or chicken or fish. And as Peter looks at these animals, he hears a voice say "Get up, kill and eat."

And he's mortified. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean!" he cries out. I've never had possum or coyote or lizard and I'm certainly not going to start now! And the voice says "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." It's profound. It says not just in that moment with the animals, but for all time, that if God created it and called it good, it is not up to us to say that God is wrong. But just to be sure Peter gets the point, that litany where the voice tells him to kill and eat, and that nothing should be called unclean that God has made clean, that happens twice more.

Then Peter finds out that men from Cornelius want him to come visit, so this devout Jew goes to the home of an unclean Gentile. And while he is there, he becomes convinced that the lesson he learned probably applies to this Gentile too, and as he is preaching and sharing the Good News with

Cornelius, the Holy Spirit comes and is poured out on the Gentiles who begin speaking in tongues and praising God. And Peter rejoices and baptizes them all. But the story we read in Chapter 11 for our reading today is not that story. It is about what happens after that story.

Because after this inclusive, church-broadening miracle, Peter went back to Jerusalem, and the other apostles and Jewish believers confront him. They were already getting suspicious with all this time he was spending around non-Jews and then they heard this rumor about him and Cornelius. "You failed the love-test!" You were hanging out with Gentiles instead of Jews! You ate with them! You probably laughed with them too, didn't you?? You've betrayed everything we stand for!

It takes me about two seconds to put myself in their shoes and understand what they were going through. "I saw a picture of you two together on Facebook! You said you were just doing some casual teaching, and now here you are splitting appetizers with a *Roman!*" Oh, how we like to keep people in nice, neat boxes. We like our expectations to be met. We like to have everyone live to our standards. And when they explore or expand or grow or broaden their horizons, we feel like they are doing that because we are inadequate somehow. If I was enough for you, why would you need anyone else? And so we feel hurt and try to keep them small. But in doing so, we oppose God.

Peter explained the whole story to them: the visions, the journeys, the conversations, the coming of the Spirit, the baptisms. And then he said, "If God gave them the same gift as he gave us... who was I to think that I could oppose God?" (11:17). We are stuck in such a scarcity mindset that we believe everything runs out. There's not enough to share Good News with strangers, there's be less for us. There's not enough to go out with other friends, what about me? There's not enough for you to go visit their family, what about us? We've experienced things running out before.

We've run out of gas, we've run out of money, we've run out of groceries, we've lost power. Things run out. Everything must run out. Which means smoke 'em if you got 'em because they won't be here tomorrow. Use it while you can, before it's gone. But here's the thing, Love - and that's ultimately what we're talking about when we're talking about relationships and jealousy - Love does not run out. Patience runs out, the grace we give each other runs out, our maturity runs out, but Love - capital 'L' love - that never runs out. There's enough of it for a mother to love two children, or three, or four, or seven. There's enough of it for a man to love his family of origin and his partner's family. There's enough of it for a woman to love her spouse and to have other friends too. There's enough of it for a cat to cuddle up to someone who's not you.

Love - capital 'L' love, God's love - does not run out. It is a gift to us to share with one another. There is always enough, and the more you give the more you get. It goes on and on through the generations and through

the ages. It is passed among cultures and among friends and even among enemies. It is the healing and unifying force on this planet. It is what Jesus died and rose for. It is what God called order into being for. It is that Love that never runs out that is God's gift to humanity through Jesus Christ.

There's a story about a rich family who hired a poor woman to be a maid. Every day, rain or shine, she walked the three miles to the bus stop, took the hour-long bus ride to where she could walk the last mile to the house; she worked 10 hour days, and then went home. She spent the money she made helping her mom and her siblings. She was the only one with a job and after taking care of everyone else and making sure she had enough for the bus and to keep her clothes clean, she had nothing left. And one summer, the family decided to take a trip to a beach house, and they invited the woman to come with them. She talked it over with her family and then agreed. She had never seen the ocean.

She got to their house and they all rode together in the family's huge vehicle the few hours it took to get to the beach. They pulled into the driveway and brought things inside and then went out the back door to the beach and the ocean. The kids ran to the water and started kicking sand and laughing. The parents kicked their shoes off and headed down. But they looked back and saw the woman standing still. Tears were streaming down her face. They hurried back and said, "What's wrong?"

“It’s so big! I’ve never seen the ocean before. It’s so big!” she said.
“But Why are you crying?” they asked her. “All my life, everything I’ve seen, everything I’ve had, everything I’ve known... it always runs out. Groceries run out. Money runs out. Gas runs out. But the ocean... I don’t think it will ever run out.” **Amen.**