

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

May 2, 2010

Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Inclusive Love

Acts 11: 1-18, Revelation 21: 1-7, John 13: 31-35

This portion of the church year is called the Easter season. The lectionary scriptures in this season guide us as to how we are to live our lives in response to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, our Risen Lord and Savior. I think the Biblical scholars who selected these scriptures recognized our human proclivity to celebrate special occasions like Easter, and then run off to live as if nothing important or life changing had really happened. So like a coach who calls timeout, these Biblical scholars chose scriptures that whistle us in “so to speak,” to remind us, again of the story of how the universe was changed by: and how we are to live our lives in response to: the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, our Risen Lord and Savior.

Allow me to backtrack in this story all the way back to Good Friday where the beaten and bloodied Jesus carried the cross up the road to Golgotha. I like how this event was portrayed in the movie the “Passion of the Christ.” This was the one scene that was like a theological oasis to me amidst the wilderness of the overdone violence in the movie. About halfway up the road, Jesus collapsed, went down on his knees, right arm draped over the cross for support, and he looked up to see his mother, Mary kneeling beside him to comfort him. With some of the last of his strength he said to her, “Behold, I make all things new.” It is a powerful scene with an endless depth of theology to it.

However, this quote, “Behold, I make all things new,” is not in the gospel passion narratives, but only in the climatic verses of the last book of our Bible, the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Yet, this quote makes sense where it is in the movie, and in Revelation. They are truly connected.

In today’s lesson from Revelation, Jesus declares, “Behold, I make all things new,” as he sits on the throne as the victorious Lamb, as symbolized by the lamb pictured in the center of our largest stained glass window. He sits on the throne as the victor over all of evil and death; and as the one who takes an evil ravaged heaven and earth, and makes them completely new. He does not restore the creation to what was in Genesis, where God called it good. But, Christ, in an inclusive manner makes us and all that is the universe, perfect. God is no longer up there in the heavens, and we down here on earth. God is with us on this newly created heavens and earth.

In the midst of “all things made new,” a heavenly voice proclaims: “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them, he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

Getting to this point of making a new creation was brutal and costly in both the real passion of Christ and in Revelation. You see, many theologians believe, and I agree with them, that the portrayal of the preparation of the final battle scene, the

infamous Harmageddon, in Revelation is a mystical description of the spiritual confrontation between Jesus and the beast of evil; as Jesus carried the cross to Golgotha; as Jesus was nailed to the cross; and as he died on the cross. In the resurrection of Jesus, the beastly evil was captured without there actually being a battle of Harmageddon, and was thrown into the pit. The terrible suffering Jesus went through to get to the point of making all things new and becoming the victorious lamb upon the throne is beyond what even a modern day movie can express.

Just as important as the suffering and death of Christ, and the new creation he gives to us through his resurrection is the inclusive love behind what he did for us. Behind the passion; behind the final battle with evil; behind the making all things new in the resurrection is what we heard from the Gospel of John: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. **Just as I have loved you**, you also should love one another.”

Biblical Professor Gale R. O’Day writes: “The example to which the love commandment points, is the love of Jesus for his disciples, (for you and me)—a love that will receive its fullest and final expression in his death. Jesus’ followers, (including you and me) therefore, are exhorted to love one another as fully as he loves (us), a love that may indeed find its expression in the laying down of one’s life. To model one’s love on a love whose ultimate expression is the gift of one’s life is to model one’s love on a love that has no limits, that knows no boundaries and restrictions. To interpret Jesus’ death as the ultimate act of love enables the believer to see that the love to which Jesus summons (us) as the (Christian) community is not the giving up of one’s life, but the giving away of one’s life. The distinction between these adverbs, up and away, is important, because the love that Jesus embodies is grace, not sacrifice. Jesus gave his life to his disciples, (to you and me) as an expression of the fullness of his relationship with God and of God’s love for the world. Jesus’ death in love, therefore, was not an act of self-denial, but an act of fullness, of living out his life and identity fully, even when that living would ultimately lead to death.” [TNIB, Vol. IX](#), pg. 734

From this death, God resurrected Jesus to the fullness of life so that it is possible for him to proclaim with all the inclusive love that is possible, “Behold I make all things new” on behalf of all creation.

This new creation is not merely something for us to look forward to after death. For, in the risen Christ, there is already the possibility, by the power of God’s Spirit and Christ’s love to bring about that new creation in our lives; so that we might love one another inclusively as Christ loves us, and give away our lives on his behalf. As God’s human agents, infused with the Holy Spirit of the new creation and the love of Christ, we can contribute to that future reign of the victorious Christ by living out his unselfish love now in the midst of the debris of the old world. [TNIB, Vol. XII](#), pg. 722

How are we to live out this inclusive love as a part of God’s new creation in the midst of the debris of the old world? The lesson from Acts shows us a way.

In a rooftop episode preceding this passage, Peter had a vision from God that God wanted to include the Gentiles into the kingdom of God — that salvation through faith in Christ was available for them, too. On top of this, God’s Spirit sent Peter to an enemy Gentile Roman army commander, Cornelius and his family to share the good

news with them. To Peter's amazement, the Holy Spirit led Cornelius and his family to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Peter then baptized them in Jesus' name. Peter also ate a meal with these new Gentile Christians. This was an act of inclusive love that shook the early church and shows us how to live out Christ's inclusive love.

"Emphasis," May/June 2004

This act of inclusive love shook the early church because Peter and the early church leaders "were stuck in an old understanding — perhaps even an old misunderstanding — that prohibited the Jews from much contact with the Gentiles, people like you and me. The Jews were rightly trying to maintain their purity before God. But, it was a misplaced purity. Even the very term used in Acts— Gentiles —is an insult and reflects the fundamental "us vs. them" mentality of the early Jewish Christians."

"Ironically, before the Gentiles could be converted to Christ, Christ's own followers needed something of a conversion. They had to change their thinking, their paradigm on how inclusive the love of Jesus Christ really is, before they could share the gospel with the Gentile world. It's an unnerving thought that — then or now — God's work is delayed because of God's own people. Surely he expects opposition to his work from a sinful world. What a tragedy, though, when opposition comes from his own workers. It's not as though this rooftop revelation to Peter was a new directive from God and the early church just didn't get the memo. Quite the contrary, God had indicated again and again in the scriptures his desire to have" the Gentiles become an intricate part of Christ's inclusive love. "Emphasis," May/June 2004

It took the Holy Spirit of God to intervene in a very dramatic way through Peter to remind the early church that the Crucified, Risen and Victorious Christ who gave away his life as an act of grace was and is all about inclusive love. It took the Holy Spirit to remind them of Jesus command: "...that you love one another. **Just as I have loved you**, you also should love one another"... and others too. How did Jesus put it in John 3: 16? "Yes, for God so loved the World that he gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have everlasting life." Yes, the Holy Spirit reminded the early church and those of us today that Jesus wants the whole world to experience God's grace, and be included in God's kingdom here and in that beautiful heavenly city as described in Revelation. No human being or organization has the right to exclude anyone from this gift of inclusive love that the Crucified, Risen and Victorious Christ gave away in his life as an act of grace.

We, as the First Presbyterian Church of Cheyenne, WY are in accord with this inclusive love of Christ as seen in our vision statement, "Bringing People Together in Christ's Love." Back in 2007, when we filled out a congregational assessment, we backed this up by stating that the most important things we want our children to learn are that they are loved by God, by you and me, and that they are included in the church! We said we wanted an associate pastor to help us set up small groups to invite more of our community into this fellowship of Jesus Christ. Our becoming involved as leaders in the Day of Giving that will be held this Friday, and our involvement in the Cheyenne Inter faith Hospitality Network are living out the command of Christ to be his people of inclusive love. This week I experienced some of our deacons and elders sharing this inclusive love by helping to rescue a woman in

desperate straits. Then, on June 13th, the Cheyenne Interfaith Council will sponsor a picnic where people of a variety of faiths can come together in the inclusive love for which Jesus gave away his life. More information will come on this event.

In this worship service today, we will further emphasize this inclusive love of Christ as we return to the setting where Jesus originally commanded his disciples to ...”love one another. **Just as I have loved you**, you also should love one another.” The setting is the Lord’s Supper where all who are truly sorry for their sins and confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are invited to eat with him as he is present with us in the Spirit. In this supper, he will remind us of his inclusive love and life given away as a sacrificial act of grace: “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” (Luke 22: 21-22. I Cor. 11: 25b)

So like a coach who calls time out, the Biblical scholars who chose today’s scriptures have whistled us in “so to speak, to remind us again, of the story of how the universe was changed by: and how we are to live our lives as God’s new creations in response to: the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, our Risen Lord and Savior and his inclusive love.