

5th Sunday of Easter, May 19, 2019

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

St. Michael's Episcopal Church, Norman, Oklahoma

North of the city limits of Waco, Texas, along the banks of the Bosque River, is a place known as Banana Bend. I suppose it's called that because the river curves through the area in a way that, when seen on a map, might suggest a banana. I don't remember there being any banana trees in the area. East Texas evergreens—pine and cedar, certainly. Old-growth oaks, in abundance, with Spanish moss cascading from the branches. Grass and bushes and vines of all sorts, along the water and up the banks on either side.

It was, in those days late in the last century, a place apart. Close enough to town to get there and back in a short drive, and yet seemingly in another world altogether. You could feel tension and anxiety fall away as you drove past the gates of north entrance into Cameron Park, and kept on going. The air felt cooler, lighter somehow, even in the hottest stickiest days of July and August.

Along the river were what folks called “river houses.” Most of these were modest, at best...single or double-wide trailers that had been placed there years before, and gradually added onto by subsequent generations of family members. Architectural expansion and decoration was limited only by the owners' finances and personal taste—No HOAs on earth would have been brave enough to try to take on these kings and queens of their respective castles.

Upon arriving at the river house to which one was bound, the first order of business (after greeting your hosts and offering your contribution to the day's feast) was to fill your Wallerin' Mug. (*Demonstrate Wallerin' Mug*). Every river house had a stash of these, but if you were a regular guest you might well have your own. Large enough to hold several cans or bottles of your beverage of choice, equipped with a watertight lid and long reusable straw, and capable of floating even when fully loaded, (that is, the cup or you yourself) these were necessary equipment for what was to follow.

For the purpose of coming to the river house, especially in the hot months, was to go wallerin'. To get in the water, and just bask in it. To float and bob and paddle around as long as you wanted, or until your wallerin' mug needed replenishing. To enjoy the company of friends, to tell stories and jokes to which everyone already knew the punchline, and yet would laugh heartily anyway. To share a meal together, grilled on the well-worn barbecue pit on the porch, supplemented by the various salads and sides, served from Tupperware dishes out of the ancient avocado-green refrigerator in the kitchen. To sit and laugh and talk late into the night, by the light of citronella candles that did help keep the mosquitoes at bay, and eventually to say a sleepy “thank you, good night” to the hosts, and make your way back to town, and home.

“To Waller” therefore, is to take delight in the goodness and abundance that one is offered; to bask in the joy that is present, in whatever way it may present itself.

We’re in “Wallerin’ Season” right now, in the Church’s annual cycle. Fifty days of rejoicing; one-seventh of the year given over to celebrating the Resurrection of our Lord; the sound of our assemblies punctuated with Alleluias at the beginning and the end of the liturgy; the stories of the first followers of Jesus as OUR continued stories, as our first readings at the Eucharist. We hear the apostles’ footsteps RUNNING to keep up with what God is already doing among the people who—supposedly—have not been included in the Good News of the Gospel. And yet...

This morning Peter is called on the carpet by the early church leaders to explain himself. “Why” they ask “are you consorting with THOSE PEOPLE?” Until now, the news of Jesus’ ministry has been for, and among, the Jewish community. The disciples—all of them—are observant participants in the life and worship of the people of Israel, who are convinced that Jesus (also a participant in the life and worship of the people of Israel) is the fulfilment of all the hopes of that tradition and those who follow it. They are “People of the Way” of Jesus, and part of that identity (so far) is to be part of the faith and tradition of the people of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Peter has been in the company of someone who is none of these things. And what he tells them, changes everything.

“I saw a sheet lowered from heaven... “What God has called clean, you must not call profane.” Those whom God has called to be part of God’s household, you may not keep out or exclude because of your own distaste, or even your own faith tradition.

“And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.” “Repentance”==Metanoia. Change your mind; change your direction; enter into the Way and the Mind of Christ. Again and again, as often as it takes.

The mercy and welcome and abundance of God is bigger than they had imagined. That “sheet” (One commentator has called it a “picnic blanket”) was big enough to hold EVERYTHING—and every one, for Peter to recognize as precious in God’s sight. We still struggle with that, as the Church. We believe it—but sometimes it’s hard to do it, to live it. To say, and to act, toward those not like ourselves: “You are loved. You are valuable. God cares for you, just as you are, right now.” We get caught up in our own point of view, when God invites us to view one another in a different way—through God’s own eyes, of unconditional love and abundant welcome.

The Gospel lesson this morning is really short. Four verses, from the middle of what the scholars call “the Farewell Discourse.” Jesus is preparing the disciples for life without him, reminding them of what they already know, but what they will need to hold onto in the days and years and centuries ahead.

“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.”

By the time Jesus says these words to them, he has already performed a parable for them moments before. He has taken water and a towel, knelt before each of them one by one, and washed their feet. We are told that Judas, the betrayer, has departed the scene—but not before his feet were washed too. Not before he was made welcome at the table, even as Jesus knew what he was about to do.

We’ve heard these words before, just a few weeks ago.

On Maundy Thursday, when we were invited to kneel with water and a towel, to wash one another’s feet.

To come and meet Jesus in one another; to become Jesus for one another.

“By this, everyone will know that you are mine—that you love one another.”

This is the sign by which Jesus tells us we are to be recognized.

Not that we believe the right things about Him;

Not that we can recite page after page of the Scriptures from memory;

Not that we earn God’s favor by following the rules to the last letter and period; but that we love.

That we kneel and care for, and bathe and feed one another, as weird and outlandish as that sounds.

I don’t know about you, but from where I stand, I don’t see as much of that as I would like.

This week has been filled with news of people claiming to be followers of Jesus, acting in ways that do not seem particularly loving or caring. I believe it was Augustine of Hippo who said “If your interpretation of the Scripture does not lead you to greater love of God, or of your Neighbor, then you’re reading it wrong.” (That’s a rough translation...) The misreading, the fearful story that seems in common circulation just now in particular sounds to me like “There’s not enough to go around.” (Not enough money, or resources, or time, or medical care, or food, or love.)

“I have come that they may have LIFE” Jesus says “And have it in abundance!”

We hear that in the lesson from Revelation: “See, I am making all things new... I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.”

This is the Easter promise, the hope of “all things made new.” Not that the bad things and the hard things and the fearful things will not happen—but that they will not have the last word. The water of Life is given, in abundance, as a gift. We are called to bask, to bob, to float in that abundance—even, yes, to Waller in it.

Then, and only then, can we know that the hope that sustains us is greater than ourselves.
Then, and only then, can we respond out of the abundance that fills us and surrounds us,
in spite of the voices telling us to be afraid and anxious.
Then, and only then, can we love as we have been loved.

