

Church of the Resurrection Centerville - Easter 6B - May 17, 2009 - Homily by Ruth Eller

The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. . . . (Acts 10:45)

*I have called you friends. . . . You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.
(from John 15:9-17)*

Sing to the Lord a new song. (Psalm 98:1)

Sing to the Lord a new song—a *new* song.

What is new in Christ's call to us? In his choosing us to be his friends? In the command to follow his way, instead of another way?

His way instead of another: I'm not thinking here of the other great religions of the world. I am thinking of the other ways that tug at us from our culture or our own selfishness. The way of might makes right, for instance. Or the way of violence in the name of defense. (Yes, that would include torture—but more of that later.)

On the level of societal goals, it might be the way that says whoever ends up with the most toys wins. Or in our personal lives, the way of manipulation and emotional blackmail—a family favorite available to persons of all ages. This way leads to getting *your* way all the time: the way of *my way or no way*, you might call it. A three year old does it by throwing a tantrum. Grown ups have more subtle methods. This way says that I am the only one in this house that counts, and you'd better act accordingly or you'll regret it.

And then there is the tribal way, known in every culture or club or class or religious group in the world. This way proclaims my *kind of person* is the only kind of person that counts. You could call this *our way or no way*.

Each of these paths is a kind of maze. Once you start down that track, it's really hard to find your way out. This is because your only focus is yourself, your own needs, your own power, your own kind. Every turn you take leads you further into your own narrow concerns.

So what is the new song Jesus commands us to sing? What new path does his song open for us?

Many of you have walked a labyrinth, or least seen one. Maybe you've seen the one at our new Episcopal Church Center. Labyrinths have been used from ancient times as a way of meditating or praying. In the Middle Ages, they were objects of pilgrimage. People who couldn't afford the journey to Jerusalem used to go to the labyrinth set in the floor of Chartres Cathedral instead.

A labyrinth is not a maze. It has many twists and turns—yet its course is clear. If you just keep putting one foot in front of the other, you always end up in the center. I think the way of God's new song is something like that. Following it doesn't mean you escape the twists and turns of life. But it does give you a definite center and a clear path.

The center, of course, is the love of God. If you keep focused on that you realize two astounding things. First, that God loves you. Second, that God loves everyone else, too.

That's the center. The path is aiming toward that love in your own life, with all its twists and turns, knowing you are headed for the open heart of the labyrinth, God's perfect love.

God loves you, God loves everyone else: This is the lesson Christ's early followers learned when a Roman officer named Cornelius, along with his entire household, received the gift of the Holy Spirit when they didn't even know what that meant. This is what Peter is talking about in today's reading from Acts. You can imagine how shocked the disciples were. These people were Gentiles—not *our* kind of people at all. Furthermore, they had done nothing to *earn* this gift—they hadn't been around during Jesus' ministry, they had no idea what was going on. The disciples probably resented God's being so generous to these ignorant outsiders.

These feelings may be natural—but they are feelings rising from our *old* ways of thinking and behaving. Peter understood that they had all embarked on a new way, and they were singing a new song. That new song was about welcoming the stranger as a brother or sister. As Jesus says in today's gospel, *he* chooses those who follow him. Who are we to argue? Who are we to make rules about who's in and who's out?

Think of this community of faith: all kinds of people come here, already blessed by the Holy Spirit, like Cornelius, but seeking to understand more fully what that means. Christ has chosen them, as he chose us. That's all we need to know. God loves us; God loves them; therefore we must love one another. Those are the words of the new song.

All of this is about the church, of course. But the way of Jesus, the way that is Jesus, includes others as well. Jesus says the only thing we have to concern ourselves with is the *fruit* of our discipleship, not who shares that discipleship with us. In other words, what will our lives *produce*, as we follow his way? Will we sing his new song so that others know that Christ loves them, too? Will we reach out to heal or comfort or feed or teach?

Those others, by the way, include people who are, or whom we believe to be, our enemies. Jesus is very clear about that in the gospels. This is why torture is a religious issue. Isn't it interesting how the current debate has shifted from the subject of torture itself, to the age-old boondoggle of who-knew-what-when? Even politicians, it seems, squirm when it comes to torture. They will do anything to distract our attention, and their own, from the thing itself. But really, friends, do you think this is the new way Jesus had in mind for us when he called us to be his friends? When he told us to love our enemies? What kind of fruit is this?

Love is an *action word* in his new song. It's not about feelings, in the ordinary sense. It's not about liking others. It's about caring for them as fellow-creatures. Of course we want to prevent those who wish us ill from doing harm. But that's another issue. The issue for us as followers in the Jesus way is to obey and give witness to his commandments.

The way we walk is his new way. It's the way of love. Love is simply this: first, being and working with the friends Jesus has called to himself, because they have to be our friends, too. And second: it's about bearing fruit, among ourselves and in the world. We are like the fields which will be blessed today. Every one of us must have some potential harvest of prayer or service or generosity—otherwise we would not be here. The new song of love honors that potential in ourselves and in our brothers and sisters—all of them.

Gentile and Jew, old-timer and newcomer, male and female, young and old—sing to the Lord a new song. Jesus says: *I have chosen you to be my friend. Will you act like my friend? Then follow the path for which you have been chosen. It is not simple; it has its*

twists and turns. But it is clear. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.