

**Trinity Church Wall Street 11:15am Holy Eucharist – Trinity Sunday**  
**The Rev. Elizabeth E. Blunt Transcript**

**“The Priority of Love”**

The world doesn't often feel new these days. Sometimes it feels like we've heard every story, mourned every loss, and we're actually moving backwards. "Last night another person motivated by hate took brothers and sisters from us in Buffalo. Our hearts and hands and prayers will all be needed in the days ahead," preached the Rev. Elizabeth E. Blunt at our 11:15am Holy Eucharist.

In the midst of all the brokenness that persists in this world, "we've been commanded to set ourselves apart by love, which bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things." We're far from perfect, but wherever there is love, things are being made new. The readings are Acts 11:1–18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1–6 and John 13:31–35.

**Sermon Transcript:**

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I'm making all things new." May I speak to you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Please be seated.

Good morning everybody. Good morning. Well, unlikely beginnings or maybe out-of-order beginnings is the theme I'd like to posit for binding our readings together on this fifth Sunday after Easter, which makes good sense as we continue to consider life transformed by the birth and ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now, credit, where credit is due, I largely arrived at that theme in consultation with new beginnings or ministry of seniors who helped me workshop the Scriptures this past Thursday. So if you're in new beginnings and you were there, thank you fellow [inaudible]. And if all of you hate the sermon, blame them. Our Psalm this morning falls almost at the end of the alter, it's third from last but it's a summons to everything in the cosmos to offer praise, not just for God's glorious work in creation back at the beginning, but for the re-creation, God undertakes every day and in every season, over the course of every life and throughout generations. The revelation to John is the last book in our Christian Bible, and it gives us this surpassingly beautiful vision of the last beginning. A new heaven and a new earth that will usher in an age of reconciliation and solace and peace. Our gospel is Jesus's new commandment, ironically given to the disciples on the eve when he's taken from them. But I would like if you'll let me to cycle back and consider today's strange story from the book of Acts, this unlikely beginning of the church's ministry to the Gentiles. Acts you may know is for all intents and purposes, volume 2 of Luke. It's the story of the early church, and we read from Acts in every Easter tide every year. Part of Acts feels familiar.

We know the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. We know about the death of Stephen

and Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus but episodes like this one might be a little more foreign. You might not have heard this one before. Which is interesting because the passage we read today is part of what's actually the longest story in the whole book. And its core topic is really at the heart of the whole New Testament, at least the New Testament after the Gospels. How could, and how should a fundamentally Jewish expression of faith be shared among people who were not ethnically Jewish and who weren't likely to ascribe to all the parameters of Jewish sacred law. One of the central tenets of the Torah is that Israel is called to be a people set apart by God. A people chosen for a specific purpose, to be the nation through whom God blesses all the families of the earth. Set apart by God for a specific purpose, is actually a pretty good translation of the word holy as we often encounter it in the Hebrew scriptures. Here's Leviticus, I am the Lord, your God. I have separated you from the People's. You shall be holy to me. For I the Lord am holy. The law given to Moses provided lots of spiritual and practical guidelines that would help Israel maintain the parameters of that set apart miss. Observance of the Sabbath was part of that expression as we're circumcision, the shunning of idols, and the topic on the table today, excuse the pun, the observance of dietary restrictions, kashrut. At several points, the Torah details what's considered clean for Israel's consumption.

Animals with clove and hooves who chew the cud, water creatures with fins and scales, certain kinds of domesticated birds. Now, some of the items in Peter's picnic blanket fit that bill, many of them do not. The Torah also stipulates the ways in which those foods should be prepared. Lots of sociologists and scientists and other ists, have studied Israel's ancient dietary laws and posited practical reasons why they may have come to be as they are. But those who keep kosher often described the practice as an act of devotion, a way of holding God in mind and heart even through the mundane details of the day. It can also be a pretty challenging discipline made even more challenging for people raised in a different cultural context. So as the story of Jesus spread back in its earliest years, there were those for whom it resonated and those for whom it didn't in every quarter. The first disciples seem a little disappointed in the scriptures to find that Gentiles, some of whom were already familiar with the God of Israel, some of whom were not, were among their most eager listeners. We don't know if Cornelius, who was the centurion to whom Peter was sent by the spirit, had any knowledge of the scriptures on the day Peter arrived. We only know he was a good and generous man. If you're looking for those details in today's reading, you won't find them because what we really heard today was a recapitulation. This was Peter describing the miraculous confluence of events that led him to stay and dine with Gentiles before baptizing the entire household.

What we're hearing is Peter justifying his actions to critics back in Jerusalem, the headquarters of the early church. His move to broaden the circle was not immediately popular. Another interesting thing about this already pretty interesting story is that we hear about it twice in the New Testament. Once here in Acts and then a little bit more obliquely in Paul's letter to the Galatians. According to Paul, Peter is advocacy for the Gentile mission, and the Gentile mission really became Paul's bread and butter. Peter's advocacy was not quite so heroic, or at least it wasn't quite so seamless. He claims that when Peter face the criticism of the community, he caved. He stopped eating with Gentiles, and he took most of the church with him until they were all called on the carpet by Paul, who accuse them of perverting the truth of the gospel. Regardless of which story lands closer to the truth. What's not in question is the

fact that it was Peter through whom God acted to prioritize, welcome, and inclusivity as the church came to know itself. Maybe not so surprising, because Peter had watched Jesus feed thousands of strangers on a grassy plain. He'd heard him mocked time and again for eating with tax collectors and sinners. He'd seen him chatting on accompanied with a Samaritan woman and healing the children of Gentiles. Peter had been there to listen when Jesus said, It's not what goes into the mouth that defiles, but what comes out of it. Peter a fisherman from Galilee. The rock on which Jesus founded the church was led by a very vocal Holy Spirit, not to nullify or diminish the law, but to subject it to the priority of love. What God has made clean said the voice from heaven. You must not call profane, animals, maybe people. Peter gave his account before the assembly and then he provided six witnesses who had seen the Spirit descend on Cornelius household, just like it did on them at Pentecost.

Then he concluded with this. Who was I given all of that evidence that I could hinder God? How can you argue with that? The assembly rejoiced, Luke says at God's radical compassion and inclusion and the door to faith was thus open to most of us worshipping here today. But if we were to discern or suspect that this last stand was an act of sacrifice on Peter's part, we would not be wrong. With the exception of a very brief statement he makes in Chapter 15. This is Peter's last appearance in the book of Acts. We get the sense that whatever political capital he had in that moment was thereby burned. The early church determined that sharing the good news was worth sharing a table. And kept the concept of holiness being set apart by God for a specific purpose at the heart of how it understood it's calling an expressed its beliefs. Christians set aside buildings and alters, and relationships and tasks as sacred, we consecrate them. We consecrate entire lives. That's really what's happening at baptism. We make space for holiness by setting apart time each week for worship and prayer, by sharing a meal together at this table whenever we gather. But the way we set ourselves apart as a community is a bit unique. We've been commanded to set ourselves apart through love. Love which by nature resists boundaries, which bears all things, believes all things, hopes, all things. By this shall the world know that you are my disciples, that you have love for one another. The priority of love already so central to the covenant shared by God and Israel was given to Peter as his birthright, and then imprinted on his heart in a very specific way.

It was lived as a vivid example by Jesus who poured himself out for those in his care, who laid down his life, for all the sheep. Who sacrificed standards, standing, even life itself in the name of compassion. I wonder what would living that love look like for us? How could we love in such a way that the world would immediately look at us and recognize us as something different. I'm posing that as a trick question because I'm here to tell you you're already doing it. Every day I hope that sometimes you're able to take a step back and recognize the remarkable love that's flying around among you guys whenever you are together and even when you're apart, you all are from different places. The ins and outs of your beliefs and affiliations very broadly. But watch today and see how you greet one another. Not just in peace, but in love. You listen to one another. You look out for one another. You give preference to one another. You pray for each other in times of trial and grief. You welcome the stranger, and sometimes you courageously are the stranger. I have seen you fight fiercely for what you believe is right and just, this place is different than the world. Were far from perfect, being inclusive is not easy,

but the fruits of the spirit are here among us, just as Jesus promised they would be. The world doesn't often feel new these days. Sometimes it feels like we've heard every story and mourned every loss 100 times before. Sometimes it actually feels like we're moving backwards. Last night another racist attack. Another person motivated by hate, took brothers and sisters from us in Buffalo. Our hearts and our hands and our prayers will all be needed in the days ahead. We will need to take care of each other, so please keep an eye on your community. Yet, in the midst of all that, in spite of the brokenness that persists, we know that a harvest still springs up from Jesus's transformative intervention in the life of our world. Wherever there is love, things are being made new.

Amen.