

May 2, 2010
Fifth Sunday of Easter
Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

WHAT'S NEW?

Sometimes I like to ask it a different way.
But it can throw people off.
What do you say? I ask.
The most often reply is, About what?
Anything you want, I add.
It's just another way of asking: What's up? How are you doing? What's new?

What's new? Now that's tricky as well. If nothing's new, there can be too much of the same stress. Or lackluster tedium, monotonous boredom. We could quote kitchen-table wisdom and say: *Some things never change*. We could go Zen with: *What is is*. We could go Biblical, ala-Ecclesiastes, and get philosophical: *There's nothing new under the sun*.

Ask people "what's new," and sometimes there is great news to share. And sometimes it can be pretty bad. Which is probably why we stick to "how are you?" Fine. Doing OK. Getting by.

A major criticism of religion is that things never change. That on the big issues you have to think of change in units of centuries or decades, not years. It may not even happen in your lifetime. Maybe some Roman Catholics feel that way when they try to imagine women or married priests.

You'd think it were a verse in the Bible. The oft-quoted seven last words of the church: *We've never done it that way before*.

Yet, there's so much "new" stuff in our scripture readings today, that it's almost overwhelming. But before we get to the new, let's mention something that never changes: controversy and division, resistance to change, and fall-out when things do.

In our first reading, Peter has some explaining to do to the church council. The good news about Jesus and his resurrection is spreading like wildfire. Even without an evangelism strategy, a mission statement, or a five-year plan. But just when things are moving along, a scandal breaks. Why? Peter's whole world-view has been altered and it changes everything.

Has that ever happened to you? You can date your life by the "before" and "after" moment. Everything you once thought, knew or believed is altered. Maybe it was a crisis of faith or something that didn't fit in the nice box of your "so-called life."

For Peter, his faith had drawn pretty clear lines between Jews and Gentiles, clean and unclean, what you could and couldn't eat. There were laws. Bible verses. "Vision and expectations" for apostles and leaders.

If only Peter hadn't encountered Cornelius. So devout and God-fearing. Such a good man. And ... a Gentile.

Peter has a dream--a vision--of a sheet coming down from heaven. And on it is all the food his faith calls unclean. A voice tells him to eat the food, but Peter replies that it goes against laws that he followed with all his heart. And then comes the new thing. A spirit-given message that there are no distinctions. In God's eyes, he and Cornelius are equal.

There is fall-out with this kind of thinking. I don't know if benevolence is withheld or folks leave. But Peter takes heat for this. It's simply shocking. Incredulous.

I've lived through three versions of a hymnal: red, green, and cranberry. Two versions of the Bible: RSV and NRSV. So many sound versions: 33, 45 and 78 r.p.m. records; eight-tracks; cassette tapes; CD's; MP3's. I can't even keep up with all the new versions of Windows, Word, Mac OSX version 10.6.3.

But this new version. Jews and Gentiles together. Too radical too even grasp. Call it Jesus movement 2.0.

But things keep changing. The Spirit keeps prodding. And with every new version comes not only amazing renewal, but also struggle and loss. Martin Luther and the Reformation--call it 3.0. Maybe last century's mergers of Danish, Norwegian, Swedish and German Lutherans are version 3.1. The ordination of women in 1970--version 3.2. (And it's only taken forty years, but I hear Lake Wobegan Lutheran finally has a woman, albeit interim, pastor.)

Well, it's hasn't been such a quiet year for the ELCA. I hear version 4.0 came out last summer at Minneapolis. A change many in this room could hardly imagine happening, yet one for which we waited and prayed, worked and hoped. As radical, revolutionary, divisive, and spirit-led as any renewal or justice movement.

Sometimes it's hard to even imagine the "new thing." For the church, the world, or even our lives. John Lennon's famous song invites us to imagine there's no heaven or hell, no killing, and no religion. *Imagine all the people living for today. Imagine all the people living life in peace.* Sounds pretty good to me.

Strange then, that we have yet another vision in our second reading: the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. It's the dream of a world—this world—where there is no harm or hurt. God dwells among us, here and now. And all things are made new!

There are a number of books, songs and movies titled "Heaven Can Wait." No wonder Friedrich Nietzsche once said: *In heaven all the interesting people are missing.*

Let me tell you something: there are lot of interesting and fascinating people here in worship this morning. And this *is* heaven.

Heaven would be boring if everyone were the same color, liked the same music, ate the same ethnic food, were INJF's, and fell in love the same way. Yet if God is "wholly other," we might as well expect heaven-sent dreams and visions once in awhile to surprise and even shock us. As William Willimon writes, "Whenever boundaries are broken, whenever the *other* is embraced by the church, then that is "from heaven."

In our struggles along the way, we have been sustained by the song of heaven, and vision of such a heaven. It is Jesus' command to love one another that has led us treasure the diversity of the human family.

I don't know about you, but I can't wait for the next version. I can't wait to see what will happen when the people of God—all of you here—continue each week to carry the new life of Easter to the places you live, work, study and love. I can't wait to see what the Spirit will be up to next. What new and radical ideas will challenge and change the people of God in the years ahead.

But for now, heaven doesn't have to wait. Heaven comes down to us this day as we gather around the table and share the feast of the Lamb. There are some tears to wipe away, the cost of love and the wounds along the way.

What's new is that things never stay the same. Easter dawns again. God brings life from death. The vision of a praise-filled, earth-centered, mercy-driven, grace-activated heaven is not only a future hope. It is the gift of this Lord's Day. The Risen Christ stands among us, and offers more than we could ever hope for: *Behold, I make all things new.*