

Kirby Lawrence Hill

Abington Presbyterian Church

May 19, 2019

Acts 11:1-18

John 13:31-35

THE IDENTIFYING FACTOR

I came down out of the pulpit because I wanted to tell those of you on this side of the sanctuary a secret. You see those people sitting over there (pointing to pulpit side of the sanctuary) – do you know why they sit over there? They think they are always on the right side of everything. Do they ever cross the aisle when it is time for the passing of the peace? You know, they don't act like they are really from around here. I don't think they even like Philly cheesesteaks or soft pretzels. They are Gritty folks who don't even like the Philly Fanatic. What's wrong with them! That's just how they are.

(Talking to other side): You know why those people over there sit on that side? Don't tell them I said this, but I hear they band together as the uncaring type who weren't even sad when Grumpy Cat died this week. I don't know who they pull for, but I hear tell they don't like Joel Embiid, Bryce Harper, or Carson Wentz. And those folks in the south transept – they are so sit-offish. They are their own little clique over there. They don't like the choir, so they sit where they can't really see them very well.

(To both sides) Actually, there's plenty of reason not to like the choir. You see them - they process in, they recess out, wanting to be the center of attention. Keep this on the q.t., but half of those people are up in the chancel because they want everyone else to look up to them and the other half like to look down on all of you.

(Returning to pulpit): Wherever you sit, I hope that kind of talk doesn't sit well with you. I'm glad you know by now when you shouldn't take this preacher seriously. But, it really wouldn't take a lot to sow seeds of dissension and alienation, would it? It can happen rather quickly or such things can develop gradually, even over generations. Our story from the book of Acts today makes

reference to a Jewish understanding of food that was split into two categories – that which was kosher and that which was considered to be unclean. There is good reason to believe that kosher practices originated because certain foods, when not carefully prepared, could be unhealthy to eat. That is certainly true of pork, which tops the list of non-kosher foods. Over generations of kosher practices, those dietary boundaries became a part of Jewish identity – not only was it a healthy way to eat, it became a religious discipline, and a way for Jews to have a sense of belonging together as a people with common practices. The kinds of food that were on the kosher no-no list got labeled ‘unclean’ or ‘profane.’ So it was not surprising that other people who ate those non-kosher foods began to be viewed by many faithful Jews as people who were ‘unclean’ or ‘profane.’ Those people who live over there who eat differently than we do gradually became ‘those people.’ They didn’t want to associate with ‘those people’ so they did what they could to limit contact with them. In some folks’ minds, there were God’s beloved people and there were ‘those people,’ those Gentiles.

In human history, geography and limited transportation often led to natural separation between one group of people and another. Now that many of those limits have diminished, people are using other means to distinguish one group from another. Groups form that are dietary in nature, or that have certain political leanings, or that enjoy particular kinds of entertainment, including pulling for specific sports teams. Those who have more money than others and those with particular kinds of jobs tend to group together. Groups form that have a specific gender or transgender identity and there are groups that seem to get their identity from seeking to antagonize other people. Of course, there are groups that have certain national identities or certain religious identities or certain refugee status that are welcome in some places and unwelcome in others. We live in a context where specific media vie for attention from particular groups, often magnifying intolerant views and values that further fragment our world. There are many forces that lead people to characterize others who are somewhat different from them with derogatory thoughts or words about ‘those people.’

Simon Peter, while he was praying, had a vision that began to undo his understanding of what foods and what people were unclean. After the vision, he

said it was the Spirit of God who led him to go to Caesarea to some whom he previously had considered ‘those people.’ A Gentile man named Cornelius simultaneously had a vision that he should send for someone named Simon Peter who was in Joppa. This man had a saving message to share with him. God brought them together in an encounter that was well beyond their individual comfort zones. Cornelius was surprised to be blessed by listening to this man who was beyond his own kind. And Simon Peter was surprised to see indication that God was pouring out the Holy Spirit on those whom he would have previously considered to be unclean. When the people who comprised the home base for the early church back in Jerusalem heard about this turn of events, they were surprised as well, and they were not particularly pleased about what Peter had done. So after going to Cornelius, along with his family and friends, Peter makes the trip back to Jerusalem to meet with those who were angry with him. I guess the trip to Caesarea and the trip to Jerusalem each held their challenges. Peter told the home folk what had happened and how he had come to recognize that God showed no partiality between peoples. This wasn’t his idea – it was God’s, he told them. He then told them the conclusion he had come to, that he didn’t figure he was someone to hinder God’s initiative.

It shouldn’t have been such of a surprise. Peter and other disciples had been with Jesus when he had gone to ‘those people,’ whether it was Gentiles or other people considered to be unclean because of their diseased state or their outsider status. He had seen Jesus show no partiality in his ministry. Through this One whom he had followed, he had seen that God’s love was broader than he ever could have imagined. Jesus himself, on the night before he died, called them to be identified as his disciples by the love they showed to one another. They were to love ‘those people’ who were beyond what had been the boundaries of their group, and they were to love ‘those people’ within their group who were having a hard time adjusting to what God was doing.

So there are ‘those people’ in here who sit somewhere you don’t. And there are ‘those people’ beyond this place, some of whom sit in synagogues or temples, some of whom kneel in mosques, some of whom view no religion as sitting so well with them. And we may hear one thing and another about those people over

there somewhere, some of which may be true and some of which will not be true. But among the things that is utterly true about all of those people over there or out there, is that they all belong to the group of God's beloved. As followers of Jesus, we're not known primarily for what we don't eat, or for where we sit or don't sit. Rather, we are called to reflect that love for those who sit in a whole variety of places, here and elsewhere – it is to be our chief identifying factor. Would you sitting on this side say 'Amen' to that? Would you sitting on this other side say 'Amen' to that? Would you sitting in the chancel say 'Amen' to that? Well then – Amen.