**READINGS:**

Acts 11:1-18

Psalm 148

Revelation 21:1-6

John 13:31-35

**SERMON**

Today/Yesterday we had our annual synod assembly. That is like the annual meeting for all of the churches in our Northeastern Ohio Synod of the ELCA. It was very different this year, I think for the purpose of trying to cut costs. This year, the “gathering” occurred through Zoom. Some voting members and rostered leaders went to local churches to participate in Synod Assembly watch parties. I and our 2 voting members Alta and Chris went to the watch party at Zion in Youngstown. It was a very different kind of Assembly…it was only 3 hours long! But we met, we heard some reports, voted on some items that required a vote, had some time for Fellowship with the others who attended the watch party, and we were on our way home about Noon.

We aren’t complete strangers to doing synod assembly this way. We did it like this right after COVID. Nevertheless, it was nice to be able to accomplish everything in 3 hours and only have to drive 10 minutes. At every assembly we hear a report from the Bishop of our Northeastern Ohio Synod, who is Laura Barbins and a report from a representative of the ELCA. This year, we watched a video message from our Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, which will be her last as she retires from the position of presiding bishop this year.

Each bishop, in her own report, touched upon the issue of closing congregations. It is true that, in our synod, a number of congregations have closed over the past few years. And it is true that when we hear of the closing of congregations, we have some grief and anxiety about it. We wonder, why is this happening? Is the ELCA dying? What about our own church? It certainly wasn’t like this when I was a kid.

But in each of their own ways, Bishop Eaton and Bishop Barbins reminded us that this isn’t a sign that the big “C” “church” is dying. Instead, it is a reminder that changes happen over time, even and especially when it comes to the work of God’s people. In some places, the purpose for which a congregation existed has been fulfilled and the church closes. In some

ways, the purpose of God’s people changes, so a worshipping community may join together with other worshipping communities to do ministry together. Our leaders need to constantly remind us that change is part of the life of faith. Neither the community of God’s people nor the understanding of our faith has remained the same since the days of Jesus. In other words, part of this resurrection life that we continue to live in today is accepting the reality that the newness that Christ makes possible can lead us in different directions, can change our perspective and that is a completely normal part of our experience.

If we have any questions about that, we only need to look at the Acts passage assigned for today. Peter gives a pretty good explanation of the backstory, but I’ll try to fill in the blanks. The believers at Jerusalem would be the Jewish believers in Jesus. Peter, however, in his travels, had an experience in which he felt God calling him to go to a gentile named Cornelius and share the gospel of Jesus with him. And since Peter was there and since God was making no distinction between Peter the Jewish believer and Cornelius the now gentile believer, Peter shared a meal with them. We can really get the sense from Peter’s recounting of the story that this was a completely transformative experience for him, and that he knew that this was God at work in him and through him.

But as we hear in the early verses of this passage, the Jewish believers in Jerusalem were at first not read in on this new mission, this new direction. They criticized Peter when he came back. So, Peter recounted his experience and notice the two steps to their reaction. The first step was that they were silenced, they didn’t say a word. Sometimes, silence is golden. It was like that, “Oh, ok,” moment where they could see the situation as Peter saw it, which was this new thing that God was doing to bring these 2 groups…Jews and Gentiles…together into the family of God. And the second thing that they did was praise God.

They praised God because hearing Peter’s story of his transformational experienced was transformational for them as well. They accepted Peter’s testimony that their relationship with the Gentiles would be changed as they are joined together in new life in the risen Christ. This also meant that, eventually, the believers had to send missionaries to the Gentiles. And that led to more challenges when the believers had to figure out if Gentiles needed to be circumcised and follow the same dietary Laws as the Jews, essentially becoming Jewish, before they could become baptized believers. But this is where God, through the risen Christ and the

Holy Spirit were leading the believers at this point…extending the good news of Christ to the Gentiles. This is where God was leading them, even though it took them a minute to catch on and catch up.

This is an important reminder for us…the faith, the church, the risen life has not been easily understood, cut-and-dry, from the very beginning. Instead, our experience of the risen life is one that will include times of misunderstanding and transformation, times of endings and beginnings, times of change and transformation. We will not, we should not expect that we will understand God, God’s love and character, Christ’s death and resurrection, the Bible, the church the exact same way throughout our entire lives. And we can expect that sometimes the risen Christ will lead us, as individuals or as a congregation, off into something we didn’t foresee. With the changes that our society, our country are going through, it is important to pray for God’s guidance for the ways in which we are being called now, today, to share the gospel of Jesus, to care for God’s creation and to serve those who are being forgotten or harmed.

One of the topics that Bishop Barbins touched upon in her synod report was something called The One Church Experiment. It is an invitation…no one is being forced…but it is an invitation to congregations to consider partnering together in various ways to be more effective in mission and discipleship. This is something that some of our neighboring Lutheran congregations are talking about and discerning. Meanwhile, we have a wonderful group of youth in our God Squad who are very thoughtful about how to live out their faith…as you can tell from their Social Statement projects in the Narthex. Maybe they will have some thoughts to lead us in new directions.

Regardless, Peter reminds all of us today to be open to our faith, our perspective, our mission being transformed. Even he, the one who was with Jesus throughout his earthly ministry, the one who took the lead after Jesus’ ascension, needed an experience of transformation to allow him to follow where God was leading. What we know today is not all there is to know about God and God’s word. What we understand today is not a full understanding of our faith. What we do as a church today is not all we will ever do; what we are, as a church, today is not all we will ever be. Our triune God, Sovereign, Savior, Spirit is always working, always moving, always leading and accompanying us. Amen.