

Sermon – John 13:31-35; Acts 11:1-18
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Grace Lutheran Church
5 Easter – Year C
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“A Love That Gives Itself Away”

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

1. Several months ago, those of us going on the mission trip to Martin, Slovakia this coming summer were gathered in the youth room, discussing the trip and what we are most excited about for our visit. Some said they were thrilled to be making their first international journey. Others noted how good it will be to see the friends from Martin who visited us last summer. A common answer was that it will be inspiring to see how Christians in other places live and worship. When it was my turn, I simply smiled and said, “The food.” I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m excited about those other things, too. But have you had Slovak food? I recall my first visit to Slovakia, shortly before I was ordained. Friends took us out to a traditional restaurant and I was basically commanded to order the bryndzove halusky. Skeptically, I asked what this was. Lumps of boiled potatoes drenched in sheep’s cheese. This did nothing to stir my appetite. Boiled potatoes? And I didn’t even know sheep could make cheese! The only selling point was that the dish comes topped not only with bacon but drizzled with bacon grease. So whatever, you only live once, right? So I ordered it, not so much because it sounded good but because it was a dish my hosts were wanted to share with me. And now, given the chance, I’d eat it every day. But I never would have done so if not for my relationship with my friends who valued the food so much. So yeah, I’m excited for the food.
2. One can imagine a similar skepticism in Peter, summoned from Joppa to Caesarea, called – while he was hungry – by servants of Cornelius, a Gentile

- and a centurion in the Roman army. To go with these men would mean to eat with them, and to eat with them would mean to eat like them. And this, for Peter, was not only unappetizing; it was against the rules of his religion, contrary to Torah. And while bacon makes something more appetizing for me, the exact opposite would have been true for Peter. But to not go would be to ignore the call of God's Spirit, who prepared Peter for this moment with a vision of formerly profane foods and the command to kill and eat. To not go would have been to miss out on an encounter that would change the Church as Peter and Cornelius broke bread and talked. One was a disciple of Jesus, one a servant of the emperor; these men should have been enemies, but in sitting and eating they discovered that God was doing something new.
3. At another meal in Slovakia on another visit, Erika and I were invited to the home of Katka. Growing up as a child of the eighties, all I had known of what was then Czechoslovakia was that they were communists, the enemies of the good; they were barely human at all. Or so I was taught. But there, over a meal graciously prepared, Katka told us of how she had kept her faith during communism. She went to the cabinet where the treasured family china was held, and took out possessions of even greater worth. One by one, she unwrapped flannelgraphs of biblical figures. I chuckled at first, remembering the Sunday school teachers of my childhood telling the stories of scripture through what passed for cutting-edge pedagogy in 1982. She went on to tell how each one had been smuggled back into the country during communism, forbidden contraband to be used to teach Slovak children in house churches the story of Jesus; this continued the work begun in Acts as the early church told the story of Jesus that crossed all boundaries, bringing people who were formerly enemies into the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, so often enacted around shared meals, and always enacted each time we gather at the table of our Lord Jesus Christ. In such encounters, we learn what Peter learned. That the old ways are passing away and that God is doing something new; that what we eat is not so important as the people with whom we eat and share

- fellowship; that the boundaries of the kingdom are not as solid as we might think, and that the Spirit is drawing all people to Christ.
4. This is, of course, the work of Christ himself, the new kingdom inaugurated in his death and resurrection. In law and gospel we find that we are equal in our separation from God and from one another, equal in our sin, but more amazingly, equal in the loving grace that God pours upon us that all such separations may finally cease. The night before his death, just after Judas goes out to betray him, Jesus gives to his disciples a new commandment. And it's not about what you shouldn't eat or with whom you shouldn't associate; no, it's about love, that we should love one another. And not in some fuzzy way. No, to love in the way that Jesus loved us. To give ourselves away for the sake of others as the Father gave the Son to save the world that God so loves. In this love, and only in this love, do we find the courage and the grace to abandon everything we know, to release our distinctions and ignore our partiality, and enter together into Jesus' kingdom way of life. In Jesus' love, Peter and Cornelius discovered something new. In Jesus' love, a young pastor discovered that the bad guys from his childhood were anything but, and that the Spirit can be at work in the most surprising places. We are simply unable to perceive this on our own, but in our rising with Christ and by his command, this love that crosses all boundaries, that gives itself away, becomes our identity. This love becomes how people will know us, recognizing in us the imprint of Christ's cross made manifest in a love that knows neither boundary nor ending.
 5. Here at Grace, we are called to break down the boundaries of sin and separation in the name of the risen Christ. To do this, Christ has given us one command: to love one another as he has loved us. Christ loved us by giving himself away, and we are called to do the same that Jesus' work might continue to grow, flourish, and cross all divides. As we are opened up by the Spirit to the work of Christ, we are called and invited to give of our selves,

our time, and yes, our possessions for the sake of Jesus' love. It is almost that time at Grace when we prayerfully consider what our personal financial commitments to the church's ministries will be for the coming year. As you reflect upon what the work of Jesus at and through Grace means to you, I hope you will consider making a Faith Promise, helpful both in our planning for the coming year and in indicating your personal commitment to God's work. And I pray that, if possible, you will increase your giving. God is doing great things in our midst – forgiving sins, declaring life, crossing boundaries, making music, teaching children – and for this work to flourish, it needs to be supported. I'd like to add a note about this year, too. We are in the final quarter of the fiscal year, and we actually have a good shot at finishing the year without a deficit, which I understand has become a bit of a rare event in recent years. So let's just go ahead and do it, giving enough so that we can focus less on finances and more on putting those resources, faithfully given, to work even as the Spirit is at work in us. As my friend Bernie in South Carolina used to say, "I've got good news and bad news. The good news is that we have more than enough money to do everything that God is calling us to do. The bad news is that some of it is still in your pockets." Well, we can change that, returning to God the gifts that have been so freely and generously bestowed upon us. Let's close this year out well and get the next one off on a faithful foot.

6. My friends, Christ is risen and the Spirit is on the move. Boundaries are being broken down; those who were separated have been invited together to the same table, where the gifts of Jesus Christ are so freely given. Here we are Together in Christ. So come, accepting the invitation of your Savior to the table where all are welcome. And go, giving joyfully and generously so that Christ's invitation and his promise of life may be heard by all.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!