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Easter 5C
Peace, Seattle
April 28, 2013
Acts 11:1-18; John 13:31-35

A WIDER CIRCLE

When the Kindems go on road trips—which we did last weekend to the Oregon coast—there are certain CD's we want bring along. A recent favorite is the soundtrack for Fiddler on the Roof.

Ever since seeing a live production a few months back, we've kept the music close at hand and can't help but sing along! *(break into singing "If I were a rich man...")*

In the opening scene of FIDDLER, we meet Tevye, the milkman, as he makes his rounds through the village of Anatevka, introducing us to his community. Tevye summarizes their way of life together with one word . . .(sing!) **TRADITION! Tradition! . . . Tradition!**

Every relationship and every role within his family and the Jewish community in Anatevka is governed by traditions passed down from generation to generation.

"Without tradition," Tevye declares, "our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on a roof."

Through the lens of Tevye's family and village, we witness what happens when circumstances bring changes to those traditions, and to the way of life he holds dear.

When his first daughter, Tzeitel, declares her intention to marry her childhood friend, Motel, Tevye concocts a wild and crazy dream to help her—and himself—escape from the marriage he had already arranged with the old butcher Lazar Wolf.

And when his next oldest, Hodel, falls in love with a Jewish revolutionary and seeks NOT for Tevye's permission to marry, but only his blessing, he reluctantly offers them both. This wild idea that love should be a basis for the marriage covenant has turned his world upside down.

But when his third eldest, Chava, seeks Tevye's blessing to marry Fyedka, is Christian, Tevye refuses. Marrying outside the faith is a line he cannot cross. When Chava elopes, Tevye tells the family they must consider her to be dead.

How do we deal with changes to the traditions that have defined our religious heritage and cultural identity? And who has the right to authorize such changes?

These questions at the heart of FIDDLER are also at the heart of today's lesson from ACTS.

Chapters 10 and 11 of the book of Acts mark a turning point in the story of the early church. Up to this point, the working assumption of the disciple community was that the GOSPEL was intended first and last for God's chosen people. Christ's dying and rising fulfilled all the promises God had made to Israel as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. **Of course this was meant for the Jews! It was a no-brainer. And that's where the first missionary effort focused its energy.**

And what about the non-Jews, the Gentiles?
They were outside the circle, beyond God's arena of concern.
But then, as the book of Acts records, strange things began to happen.

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First, Philip's ministry produces converts among the mixed race Samaritans.
Then God leads Philip to teach and baptize an Ethiopian eunuch.

And when Saul of Tarsus, the zealous opponent of Christians, is himself converted, we begin to wonder: Where will God's Spirit strike next?

The answer comes in chapters 10 & 11. **Remember the story?** It begins when Cornelius, a Gentile and an officer in the Roman army, has a dream. In the dream a messenger from God tells him that his prayers have been heard, and that he should send some of his men to Joppa, for a man named Simon Peter.

Well, the next day, as Cornelius' men approached Joppa, Peter goes up on the roof to pray and while he's there, he gets hungry and sends for something to eat. While it's still cooking, Peter has a vision of his own—and it is much stranger than the one Cornelius had:

The heavens open and something like a large tarp is lowered to the ground by its corners. When Peter looks inside it, he sees every kind of forbidden creature—buzzards, bats, lizards, rats—all on them on the "DO NOT EAT" list recorded in Leviticus 11.

Then Peter hears the strangest thing. A voice says, RISE PETER, KILL & EAT.

Now Peter knows his Bible. And he knows the right answer: EAT?! NO WAY, LORD, I'M NOT GOING TO EAT ANYTHING UNCLEAN! Peter, you see, is determined to do the right thing.

The same thing happens three times, and shortly after there's a knock at the door and lo and behold it's Cornelius' men. When they tell Peter who they are and why they're there, Peter starts connecting the dots, and off he goes with them. By the time he's arrived at Cornelius' home and heard his story, the light is on and Peter's insight is complete:

NOW I GET IT! says Peter. GOD DOESN'T DISCRIMINATE! ANYONE FROM ANYWHERE WHO HONORS GOD AND DOES WHAT'S RIGHT IS ACCEPTABLE TO GOD.

By uttering these words in this way, Peter was opening the doors of the church to those who had previously been shut out. Almost as a punctuation point, God drops the Holy Spirit on the whole house-full, and when Peter sees it, he can think of nothing better to do than to baptize them all on the spot.

This is where today's lesson picks up the story. You see Peter hadn't checked with the folks at headquarters to see if what he was doing was in keeping with church policy. So when some of the leaders in Jerusalem get wind of this, they want an explanation, and so he goes.

- What right did he have to break God's command and eat with Gentiles? they want to know.
- Why hadn't he consulted with them first? …stuff like that.

As gently as he can, Peter tells them what happened.

- How God showed him a vision for mission that went beyond what they'd previously known.
- How it had seemed strange to him, too, at first, but now there was no doubt in his mind that God had embraced non-Jews just as God has embraced all of them.

IF GOD GAVE THEM THE SAME GIFT HE GAVE US, Peter says, WHO WAS I TO HINDER GOD?
This story marks the end of US and THEM.

It marks the end of INSIDERS and OUTSIDERS as far as God is concerned, and this is so radical a truth that the church is still trying to catch up to it 21 centuries later.

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It is still so tempting for us to draw lines around race or culture; gender or sexual orientation; generation or denomination; to include those who are inside and exclude those who are outside.

When Jesus shared final instructions with his disciples, instead of giving them a list of people to avoid, he gave them something to stride toward:
LOVE ONE ANOTHER IN THE SAME WAY AS I HAVE LOVED YOU.
IF YOU DO THAT, EVERYONE WILL KNOW THAT YOU ARE MY DISCIPLES.

When it comes to the love of Jesus, there are no insiders or outsiders; his love is for all. But let's be clear. The love to which he calls us is much more than a feeling or an attitude; it's a way of life.

One of our central purposes as a congregation is to be a place where we all can learn to love well.[1]

This community to which the Spirit has called us, is to be a living, breathing LOVE LABORATORY, where love of God and neighbor are practiced in tangible, concrete ways; ways that witness publicly to the kind of Lord we worship.

These quilts today, (and prayer shawls) are part of that love language.
Our youth ministry, our education program, our prayer ministry, our choir, our Green Team, and on and on…everything we do expresses in some way our response to Christ's call and command: LOVE ONE ANOTHER AS I HAVE LOVED YOU.

And every week, as we gather around this Table, we take in Christ's body so we can be and bear his self-giving body in the world.

Make no mistake about it: we may be located in a least churched corner of one of the least churched regions of the country, but as we go about our work as church, our neighbors are watching.

Do we have something more than another version of "US vs. THEM" to offer?
Does the experience of acceptance and welcome here, match our rhetoric?

From the very beginning the church has grappled with the question of how far God is willing to go in loving the world. The answer we get in Jesus is: farther than we can even imagine.

Let us pray.
Lord Jesus, thank you for calling us in baptism to a way of living and loving that awakens compassion within us. Thank you for reminding us of this vocation and for catching us when we fall and putting us back on the path again. By your Spirit, incarnate your love within our congregation, within our households, and wherever our daily lives take us. For we put our trust in you.
Amen.

[1] Frank Honeycutt, *Love Letter*, The Lutheran, May 2013, p. 14f