

Fifth Weekend of Easter (RCL/C): "God Isn't Finished With Us Yet"

Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

May 17-18, 2025

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I recently enjoyed a Paint & Pour evening, doing art with friends. The friend who hosted it is a **true** artist, not a wannabe like me. She told the story of a particularly creative collage she once made, incorporating items from the beach and her garden. It evolved more slowly than most of her other pieces, and her art teacher kept asking, "Is it **done** yet? **When** will it be done?" Finally she pronounced it finished.

Maybe you've been involved in a seemingly endless project at home or at work, or been struggling to wrestle words onto the page for a school paper or newsletter article, or been working hard on a painting or drawing, painstakingly backtracking, erasing, undoing, redoing things, until finally you were grateful for the deadline somebody else set or you imposed on yourself, because you simply knew it was time to say, "**It's done,**" and to step away.

Over an entire lifetime, short of our last breath, God will **never** say to us, "You're done!" Sometimes when I've screwed up in one way or another, I'll tell myself (or the other person), "God isn't finished with me yet." It's part apology, part self-absolution, part uplifting reminder that God doesn't give up on me and I shouldn't either. A wonderful rallying cry is, "There's more grace where that came from!" God will be calling, forgiving, refining, reshaping me for as long as I live. I will **never** have "arrived," this side of Heaven. I will always be "in the shop," either for repairs or upgrades! Even if today was great, and I feel like love of God and neighbor won out, the Lord isn't going to freeze-frame it. The Lord is calling all of us to **live forward**, not rest on our laurels in self-satisfaction or grind to a halt in despair.

"Change my heart, O God;  
make it ever new.  
Change my heart, O God;  
may I be like you." (ELW 801)

With Peter's history of having blurted out, "Heaven forbid!" when Jesus first predicted His Passion and death, then been reprimanded with those memorable words, "Get behind Me, Satan," and with his

still vivid memory of having denied knowing the Lord three times before the cock crowed, Peter sure didn't think he'd already scaled the heights of holiness or perfect obedience or saintly service. But I do think he would have gone to the mat to insist he was faithfully keeping the Jewish Law, as he'd been brought up to do. (After all, he was still a Jew, even though he believed Jesus was the promised Messiah.) Keeping Kosher, following the Jewish dietary laws, was very important to Peter, because Peter believed it was very important to God. In the Law of Moses in Hebrew Scripture, there is very precise instruction about what God's people should and shouldn't eat, and how their food should be prepared, including but going far beyond, no shrimp cocktail and no BLT's.

So imagine Peter's surprise when he has a prayer vision that shows a whole barnyard descending on a sheet, and hears a voice commanding, *"Get up, Peter; kill and eat."* (Acts 11:7b) That notion is so outrageous to him, he immediately answers, *"By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth."* (Acts 11:8) **I'm** thinking **he's** thinking it's a test of his orthodoxy. He sticks to his guns, and the whole scenario plays out three times. This is even though each time Peter says, "No way!" the divine voice insists, *"What God has made clean, you must not call profane."* (Acts 11:9b) Then the doorbell rings and rouses Peter out of his trance. Before we go to answer the door, though, let's linger on that word *profane*. We're more apt to hear the word *profanity* than *profane*. Profanity is obscene or **irreverent** speech, using the Lord's name in vain, a violation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment. The word *profane* is the opposite of *sacred*, but doesn't necessarily have to mean something nasty. *Profane* literally means *before/outside the temple*, meaning not within the holy precincts, not set aside for holy purposes. In this context, *"What God has made clean, you must not call profane,"* we could substitute the word *unclean*: *"What God has made clean, you must not call unclean."* In other words, it's like God saying, "You can slaughter that pig and enjoy your pork sausage without offending Me. After all, I made it, so I can tell you what to do with it."

**Sooooo** confusing for Peter. “My whole life I’ve refused to let a morsel of that cross my lips, and now You’re saying, ‘Eat it and enjoy!’?” “Why are you changing the rules now??” But there’s a door to answer. A Roman centurion has sent a messenger to ask Peter to come to his home. Peter agrees to go, tells Cornelius and his household the Good News of our Lord’s saving death, resurrection and the forgiveness available to all who call upon Him. The Holy Spirit comes upon Peter’s listeners (probably meaning they begin to speak in tongues), and he proceeds to baptize them all, and to share a celebration meal. He realizes that when the voice said, *“What God has made clean, you must not call unclean,”* God meant **people** and not just food. Peter didn’t understand all the ins and outs, but he knew that this was what God wanted **now**, and that **he** should want what **God** wants.

Word spreads and the folks back in Jerusalem are scandalized: “Peter ate with **whom??**” As far as they are concerned, to eat unclean food with unclean people makes you unclean. What was Peter **thinking??** Peter explained everything when he returned to town, and the Holy Spirit helped the others accept this sea change in their beliefs and practice.

The Lord “who isn’t finished with us yet” reveals new understandings to us, too, along the Way. Change can be hard, and we can be tempted to say, “We’ve never done it that way before!” but God is calling us to **live forward** and **be open** to new revelations. How do we know what’s from God and what isn’t? The best litmus test is love. The “love commandment” is the heart not just of this weekend’s Gospel but of the Gospel as a whole:

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (John 13:34)

I’m guessing all or most of us can identify issues we’ve changed our minds about, over time. Our Lord’s goal isn’t so much changing our minds, though, as changing our hearts.

“Change my heart, O God;  
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If Peter had slammed the door in the face of the messenger Cornelius sent, the door would have slammed in many, many more faces. I believe our job is to open the door wider and wider. Or maybe the Lord calls us to something more radical.

Pastor Mark's son and daughter-in-law have 3 children, including a set of twins. When the twins were sharing a bedroom as pre-schoolers, they delighted in closing the door and playing to their hearts content after lights-out. The baby monitor in their room ratted them out, of course. Their Dad counseled them to stay in bed and be quiet, night after night after night, all to no avail. So one day they came home from preschool and (imagine their surprise!) discovered that their Dad had removed the door from its hinges and taken it away.

Not a bad metaphor for a welcoming family of faith: don't just open the door: remove it! Our decision to become a Reconciling in Christ congregation is a recent sign that we are willing to expand our welcome as the Holy Spirit grants us grace and courage. The Lord isn't nearly done with us yet, though, so may we continue to pray:

“Change my heart, O God;  
make it ever new.  
Change my heart, O God;  
may I be like you.”

Amen.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham