

# LESSONS LEARNED

May 2, 2010

Texts – Acts 11: 1 - 18

Revelation 21: 1 - 6

They are both descriptions of visions. Peter's comes in the early days of the Church's formation, no more than a decade following the resurrection. John's is later, from the end of the first century when there are Christian communities springing up all over the empire.

*"What God has cleansed you must not call common,"* the Spirit says to Peter in his vision. The message, Luke (the author of Acts) says, is clear – God embraces all with open arms, ethnic or religious heritage notwithstanding. Peter is to welcome Gentile converts into the fellowship of Christ's Church. *"Who was I that I could withstand God?"* he later says in self-defense. [Acts 11: 9; 17] That he has to defend himself at all tells us that it was a controversial moment. That Luke, writing a full generation later on, felt compelled to devote so much time to Peter's vision suggests that the controversy surrounding inclusion was still percolating through the life of the Church.

John's vision builds on Peter's, but takes it further. *"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth,"* he writes;

*"For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away . . . And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God."* [Revelation 21: 1-2]

It is not just the composition of God's chosen ones that has been changed, John says. Everything is new – a new heaven, a new earth, and even a new Jerusalem. *"Behold, I make all things new,"* the voice of God says. [v. 5] We call it a revelation. It still is, though we seldom pay much attention to it (to tell the truth).

Edwin Markham (a poet of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) captured the spirit of both Peter's and John's visions:

“He drew a circle that shut me out –

Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.

But Love and I had the wit to win:

We drew a circle that took him in!”<sup>1</sup>

“We have committed the Golden Rule to memory,” Markham later wrote; “let us now commit it to life.” It bears repeating one hundred years later.

The business of drawing circles in order to shut people out is one of humanity's favorite past-times. We all engage in it. You can name them as well as I. Conservative or Liberal, Democrat or Republican or Progressive, native Vermonter or flat-lander, Christian or Jew, citizen or alien, American or foreigner, Catholic or Protestant, evangelical or mainline, black or white, Hispanic or Middle Eastern or Asian. They are just a few of the categories we use to describe ourselves. Nothing wrong with any of them, so long as they are used for descriptive purposes only. Ah but . . . What begins as a descriptive term can readily be transformed into something proscriptive in nature.

Two weeks ago Donna and I were in Mesa, Arizona, to visit with her mother. On Sunday morning we drove down to Tucson in order to go to church with one of our former members, Rob Backus, who relocated there two and a half years ago. Rob is now a member of the Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, a wonderfully diverse congregation whose membership embraces Anglo's, Hispanics, and Native Americans. We were warmly welcomed, but we were also surprised and (truth to tell) alarmed by the testimonies we heard that morning.

The Arizona legislature had just passed a bill making it a violation of state law to be an

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<sup>1</sup> “Outwitted” by Edwin Markham

illegal alien. The bill, which their governor subsequently signed into law, requires everyone to carry proof of citizenship and it mandates that local and state law enforcement personnel scrutinize the identity papers of every person they come into contact with whom they suspect may be an illegal alien. “I no longer recognize the country I am living in,” the pastor said that morning. The congregation erupted in applause. “We can now be stopped by the police just because they think we might be illegal aliens,” she went on. “So can our children, and our children’s children. And how will they tell who should be stopped? Will it be by our skin color? Our accent? What kind of country are we living in?”

“He drew a circle that shut me out,” Edwin Markham’s poem begins. It’s been going on for a long, long time. “*What God has cleansed you must not call common,*” Peter was told. “*Who was I that I could withstand God?*” he concluded. Who indeed are we to draw such circles? To pass our judgments on the human beings whom God has created and blessed just because their race or their ethnicity or their nationality or their sexuality differs from our own? It is an abomination. It always has been; it always will be. And there is no excuse, no justification, for it whatsoever. The so-called “Gentiles” whom scripture tells us Peter and James and John and the rest of the apostles were quick to condemn were none other than our very own ancestors. There was no room for them, and therefore none for any of us either – not in the fellowship of Christ’s Church, and certainly not in the Kingdom of Heaven.

“But Love and I had the wit to win,” Markham says, standing atop the foundation of the visions of Peter and John; “We drew a circle that took him in!” “*Behold, I make all things new,*” God says. [v. 5]

This table stands squarely in the middle of the circle of God’s love. It is the table of freedom – freedom for each of us to be exactly who we are: children of a loving and bountiful God. Let us gather around it grateful for the privilege to share our daily bread with such a

wondrous community of faith. Amen.