



“Love the Ones You’re With”

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***Fifth Sunday After Easter
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Acts 11:1–18 (NRSV)***

I'd like a little help here this morning from the baby boomers. Get in the time capsule with me and let's travel back 40 or 50 years to the first half of 1960's. Help me remember what was going on. I'll jog your memory and you add some things you remember. On February 1, in 1960, four Black college students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College sat down at a segregated Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, and refused to leave. They are then allowed to stay at the counter, but are refused service. The sit-in captured the media attention and soon spread all over the south. Dwight D. Eisenhower signs the Civil Rights act of 1960. Barry Goldwater's book, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, is published. Wilma Rudolph wins three gold medals at the Olympics in Rome. The Cold War was raging, and an American U2 spy plane was shot down over Russia. There was a presidential election that year. John F. Kennedy wins after the first-ever televised debate with a very shady and nervous looking Richard Nixon. He's inaugurated January 1961 and gives his famous speech: "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country. The Pill goes on sale that year and becomes wildly popular, despite warnings of severe adverse side effect and laws restricting the sale or advertising of virtually anything related to birth control in 30 states.

Later that year, on May 5, 1961, the Soviets have sent the first man into space and the Americans need a man in space, too. My Mom was pregnant with me. On May 25, Kennedy announces he wants the U.S. to have a man on the moon and back before the decade was over. The United States invades Cuba at the Bay of Pigs and the mission is a failure. Alan

Shepard was sent to space in the "Freedom 7". On August 13, East German border guards begin construction of the Berlin Wall. The Berlin Wall physically separated Communist East Germany and Democratic West Germany. Joseph Heller's book, *Catch 22* is published. September 1st, I was born and two weeks later the United States starts underground nuclear testing. On October 6, President Kennedy advises Americans to build fallout shelters.

In 1962, John Glenn became the first man to orbit the earth and went around three times. It was a five-hour flight. British pop group The Beatles attain their first number one hit of the British music charts with "Love Me Do." October 22, the Cuban Missile Crisis: Soviets establish missile bases in Cuba. Kennedy orders a naval blockade to divert any missiles from arriving in Cuba. November: George C. Wallace is elected Governor of Alabama. And folk singer Bob Dylan releases his first album. Rachel Carson, a scientist and writer, warned that our earth would die of pollution and chemicals. Especially chemicals that were developed to kill bad insects. DDT was a real bad chemical. It killed bad insects, along with good insects, along with plants, along with animals. She wrote the book *Silent Spring* with a warning. At least five states banned DDT. Women couldn't get credit without a male co-signer and in many states could not petition for divorce unless for adultery. Helen Gurley Brown published her famous book *Sex and the Single Girl*.

In 1963, Governor Wallace's "Segregation Forever" speech is given at his inauguration. The Vietnam War is raging. In April, Martin Luther King and Ralph Abernathy are arrested and go to jail in Birmingham during the protests. King then writes his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, is published. On June 11, President Kennedy proposes the Civil Rights Bill. One day later, in Jackson, Mississippi, the state's NAACP field secretary, 37-year-old Medgar Evers is assassinated outside his home. On August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. makes his "I Have a Dream" speech at the so-called "March on Washington" when more than 200,000 peaceful demonstrators came to Washington, D.C., to demand equal rights for Black and Whites. Part of the speech included the line: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character..." A gay rights demonstration occurred at the Whitehall Induction Center in New York City, NY. Discrimination in the military was protested. This was the first

significant gay rights demonstration in the U.S. President Kennedy is assassinated in Dallas, Texas on November 22. Lyndon Johnson takes the oath of office. The Beatles' song "I Want to Hold Your Hand," is number one on the pop charts by the end of the year.

In 1964, President Johnson declares a "War on Poverty" in the State of the Union address, thus initiating plans for his Great Society. The Beatles first appear on Ed Sullivan Show, performing with 74 million people watching them, the largest audience in the history of television. July 2: President Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1964, making segregation in public facilities and discrimination in employment illegal. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution gives President Johnson authority to prosecute an unlimited war in Vietnam unchecked by Congress. Three civil rights volunteers, James E. Cheney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, who were working to register voters in Mississippi, are murdered by southern Whites. In August, LBJ signs anti-poverty program part of his war on poverty and the Great Society. There are race riots in Philadelphia and New York. This was the first year that cigarette boxes had the warning: "Smoking can be hazardous to your health." Cassius Clay wins the heavyweight championship of the world and then announces he has joined the nation of Islam and changed his name to Muhammad Ali. The Nobel Peace Prize is awarded to King.

In January, 1965, President Johnson outlines his "Great Society" and in February, the U.S. starts bombing North Vietnam. Later that month, Malcolm X is assassinated in New York City. On March 6, the first American soldiers officially set foot on Vietnam battlefields and U.S. combat troops begin fighting in South Vietnam. In March, in Selma, Alabama, African Americans begin a peaceful march to Montgomery in support of voting rights but are stopped at the Pettus Bridge by a police blockade. Fifty marchers are hospitalized after police use tear gas, whips, and clubs against them. The incident is dubbed "Bloody Sunday" by the media. Later that same month, Martin Luther King Jr. leads a march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama joined by 25,000 marchers. By April, 25,000 U.S. troops are stationed in Vietnam. On July 30, LBJ signs the Medicare bill. On August 10, Congress passes the Voting Rights Act of 1965, making it easier for Southern Blacks to register to vote. Literacy tests and other such requirements that tended to restrict Black voting become illegal. The United Farm Workers Organizing Committee launches a strike against grape growers in California. In August, a week-long race riot in the Watts section of Los Angeles leaves 35 dead. By the end of that month,

burning draft cards becomes an illegal and punishable act. On October 16, over 100,000 anti-war protesters stage protests in 80 cities. Later that year, *Unsafe at Any Speed*, a book by Ralph Nader about the automobile industry's disregard for safety is published.

The year 1966 starts with Simon and Garfunkel's song "The Sounds of Silence" at number one on the music charts. The GI Bill grants veterans rights to education, housing, health and jobs. Timothy Leary is sentenced in Texas to 30 years for trying to cross into Mexico with a small amount of marijuana. In the spring, anti-Vietnam war protests in New York bring out 25,000 on 5th Ave. Other protests are happening in seven U.S. cities and seven foreign cities. Mississippi Blacks build tent city under President Johnson's window to protest housing conditions in their state. The NY Stock Exchange is hit with anti-war leaflets. Quotations of Chairman Mao, also called *The Little Red Book*, is published in China. In November, *Time* magazine runs a story entitled "A Good Man Is Hard to Find—So Hire Women" profiling the rising number of women in the workforce by choice. The Monkees hit the pop music charts. The first known gay student organization was founded at Columbus University in New York City, NY. Walt Disney, the creator of Mickey Mouse and a pioneer of animated films, dies of cancer on December 15, 1966,

In 1967, the first heart transplant was performed by Dr. Christiaan Barnard in Cape Town, South Africa. The US, USSR, and the UK sign a treaty banning nuclear weapons in space. Gathering of the Tribes, the first human Be-In occurs in San Francisco and 20,000 attend. 25,000 U.S. troops are sent to the Cambodian border. On April 15, 400,000 march from Central Park to the UN building and hear anti-Vietnam War speeches by Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael, and Dr. Benjamin Spock. On May 19, the U.S. launches air strikes on Hanoi. By June 30, the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam reaches 448,400. July is celebrated at the "Summer of Love" in San Francisco. During the same time, race riots rage throughout the summer in the U.S. On October, 35,000 anti-war protesters march on and storm the Pentagon. That same month, the U.S. government eliminates draft deferments for those who violate draft laws including burning draft cards or interfering with military recruitment for the war. In November, the Air Quality Act is passed providing \$428 million to fight air pollution. By December, the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam reaches 486,000. 15,000 soldiers have been killed in the war thus far, the majority—60 percent—died

in 1967. The U.S. Supreme court strikes down laws making interracial marriage illegal.

In 1968, in January the Youth International Party (Yippies) is founded and the Viet Cong launch the Tet Offensive. In February, a third-party law and order platform is announced in the campaign for President. In March, Eugene McCarthy wins 42 percent of the vote in the New Hampshire presidential primary. Days later, U.S. troops are implicated in the massacre of several hundred Vietnamese civilians at My Lai. Robert F. Kennedy announces candidacy for President and, within days, President Johnson surprisingly announces his decision not to run again for the Presidency and offers a partial Vietnam bombing halt. On April 4, Martin Luther King was shot and killed in Memphis at the age of 39. The week following Martin Luther King Jr.'s murder there are Black uprisings in 125 cities across the U.S. President Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1968, prohibiting discrimination in the sale, rental, and financing of housing. April 29: The rock musical "HAIR" opens on Broadway at the Biltmore Theater. On May 10, Vietnam peace talks begin in Paris, in hopes of ensuring that South Vietnam will not fall to the communists in the North. On June 5, Robert Kennedy is assassinated by Sirhan Sirhan just moments after winning the California primary. A major nuclear nonproliferation treaty is signed by 61 nations including the United States on July 1. By August 1st, there are 541,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam. On August 3, the first Newport Pop Festival in Costa Mesa, California opens to an audience of over 100,000 people. Performers at the festival include Steppenwolf, Jefferson Airplane, Sonny & Cher, Tiny Tim, the Byrds, Iron Butterfly, The Grateful Dead and Eric Burdon & The Animals. On August 8, Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew are nominated for President and Vice-President during Miami riots. August 25-29: Antiwar demonstrators clash with police at the Democratic Convention in Chicago. Hubert Humphrey and Edward Muskie are nominated on a pro-war platform amid violent antiwar protests in Chicago. On November 5, Richard Nixon is narrowly elected President. Shirley Chisholm is elected America's first Black woman to Congress. The Beatles' song "Hey Jude" is number one on the music charts.

Whew, what a lot of memories—it kind of makes you head spin doesn't it? Can you imagine our world without these pivotal years? Without Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement, without JFK, without the Vietnam War, without The Beatles, without Betty Friedan, without Bob Dylan, without heart transplants, without race riots and assassinations,

without the “Sound of Silence” and *Silent Spring*? Imagine who we’d be, where we’d be without these people, their courage, their message, their flaws, their insight, their visions, the famous ones and the anonymous ones, the ones who did good and the bystanders? In some ways it feels like yesterday, and in some ways it feels like forever, these 40 or 50 years ago. Just that gives me pause...these things happened 40 or 50 years ago. And think about how those years have given these events depth and meaning, far beyond what literally “happened.” Think about how you would tell the story this morning of how those events shaped your world. If you were alive during this time, what do you tell your children or nieces or nephews about these days, what was important to you, how these people and times affected who you are today and the world that we live in? If you were not yet born, think about your views of these events. How do you know about these things that happened and these people? Is it through your studies at school, through popular culture like music and movies? How do you think these things have affected your life?

So, why the headlong flight down memory lane this morning? Well, the Books of Acts in the New Testament was, for the people it is was written for, something very similar to this recounting of the 1960s. For one, it was written about 40 or 50 years after the events it’s depicting. The author was not an eyewitness to these events—he was probably a child or young person when these things happened. In fact, he may not have even been born yet. So the author recounting this story about Peter is like me recounting the JFK’s “ask not what you can do for your country” speech—I was alive then but far too young to remember the actual event. And, for all that has happened since that speech on a cold January day in 1961, there’s almost no way to think of that speech without all the newsreel in my head of the decade that came after—and more importantly the meaning that decade has in my life.

But there’s another way that my recounting of the 60’s in the U.S. is helpful for understanding this passage in Acts and in fact the whole book of Acts. As I’m sure we all know, Acts is the story of the early church—roughly the first couple of decades. And it was a time of revolutionary upheaval. The early church was a very ambitious experiment in pluralism. During Jesus’ life, he amassed quite a following—as we know, so much so that the religious and political elite became so worried about just how he wanted to use his very abundant and very evident, power over the masses that they conspired and succeeded in assassinating him. Part of what they found

threatening about him was his appeal to so many different types of people. Unlike the other messianic figures that roved Galilee, more or less as contemporaries of his, Jesus was distinct in his ability to draw followers from across many different strata of society—from rich folks to poor, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, well and sick, educated, and what we'd call today “white collar” professionals and the working class, society's favored and society's rejects.

Imagine the surprise that grew like the tide in the first decades after Jesus' death when folks started to realize how, rather than the movement Jesus started “petering out” as they'd hope, Peter and the other disciples didn't go back to their day jobs, but became leaders in a movement that exploded in numbers and grew exponentially, year by year. What started in Galilee moved to Galatia, Colossus, Macedonia, Egypt, even Rome. Within a few decades—lightening speed in the ancient world without telecommunications and easy transportation—Christians were so numerous and their numbers growing so rapidly that the Roman and Jewish authorities persecuted Christians viciously. There are even accounts of Christian missionaries in China that date to about 65 A.D. Christianity was catching on like “wildfire” as the old saying goes. In this case, the political leaders were living in the big house at the top of tinderbox and their fear led to all kinds of desperate acts of cruelty. Lest we forget, all but one of the disciples were assassinated or given the death penalty for trumped up crimes, and early church leaders like Paul were in and out of jail, beaten up, and most were murdered by the state. Sounds a lot like the 1960's, doesn't it?

What evoked such violent retribution was the early Jesus followers kept Jesus identity and core message vividly alive—everyone had a seat at Christ's table, everyone shared in the wine of forgiveness and the bread of grace, there was no price of admission, no socio-political boundaries, no hierarchy of religious elite, no arcane rules to keep “certain types” out of the fold, no caste or class system keeping the great masses in their ordered segregation. You could go to a house church in Ephesus and find this great multiplicity of people working and learning together—from every race, religion, tribe, CEO's to janitors, society mavens to harlots, the “soccer moms” with the untouchables—all would be there, and most frustratingly, when those Christians got together, it was hard for the officials to tell who

was who. They didn't know how to control this kind of movement—after all, how would you control a movement built on compassion, love, and joy?

But of course, lest we be caught up in an utopist fantasy, we need to remember that the early Christians were human—and so while they might be on their best behavior when the Roman official came to visit their house church in Ephesus, scratch the surface and the usual dynamics that characterize all human groups were there. Some people would start to talk about these other folks who did thus-and-such and, well, didn't they know that this just wasn't done, and shouldn't somebody set them straight?

So this is the early church context that Luke is writing his Acts as follow-up to his gospel. Clearly, he is writing with purpose—while both Luke and Acts read like chronologies, these are not some random diary or day-in-the life accounts. He recounts history, but he does so with theological and ecclesiastical purpose.

And what is that purpose: making absolutely clear that the gospel is not just for Jews is the clear underlying plot line that pulses throughout the gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. The passage Jaime read just a minute ago is just one more among many in Luke/Acts that the author offers to remind the first and second century church that God's love is not just for one "type" of person, one "tribe," or one "group"—God's love as shown through Jesus is for all.

We know from Acts that Peter gets this message of God in many ways—in today's passage it is in the vision of the sheet from the heavens filled with animals. For Peter, the animals in the sheet represented the dietary laws that as a Jew both separated him from others and made the "other" unclean and unworthy to eat at God's table. The menagerie in the bed sheet gave him the clear and emphatic message: all are invited to God's table. As Luke tells the story, it wasn't enough for Peter to have that spiritual "experience" and know God's welcome, it was his responsibility—indeed his privilege—to extend that welcome "hands on" as it were, as "the other" showed up at his door in the form of the three guys from Caesarea and came in for a visit. And to top it off, they brought God's unmistakable presence with them.

So imagine with me this morning a large sheet coming down from the heavens for you. What is in that sheet? Who is in that sheet? Is there anyone in your world that isn't invited to God's table? I'm thinking most of us are not worried about circumcision or dietary laws, but how about

politics? Or immigration status? Or class? Or education? Perhaps it's habit that has you withholding the hand of welcome? Or maybe it's hurt or fear? My friends, the good news of Acts is the same good news we all have born witness to in our own society and that is this: when people confront their fear and prejudice and extend the hand of welcome empowered by the love of Jesus, change happens. It is messy, and it can even be bloody—and sacrifice may be required—but this is the way God's love reaches beyond the individual to transform relationship.

God calls us to love the ones we are with—not just the ones we choose to be with, but the big tent of humanity. We are called to not just feel that, but do that: with hands and feet and food, law and protest, and music and speeches, leaders and followers, where we are, who we are with, across borders of every kind, political, emotional, country, state, and religion. No one is excluded from God's love and it's our job to let them know it. Praise be to God for giving us this sacred assignment—and for showing us in real ways and in our time that our actions can and do matter.