

Sermon Preached on
Fifth Sunday of Easter
(April 24, 2016)
"Y'all Means All"

Most of you know that before coming to St. James', I served a parish in North Carolina. So it has been with some interest that I've been following the news about that so-called "Bathroom Bill" there in which, among other things, the state made it illegal for transgender people to use bathrooms they feel fits their identity. That is, if a person is born male but identifies as female, the law makes it illegal for them to use a women's public restroom.

My purpose today isn't to comment on that law. (Though now that NASCAR has come out against it, I suspect it's doomed) Rather, it's something that one of my former colleagues there shared which I find fits today's lessons. He was sharing news reports of the rallies by churches against the law and posted a picture of people holding up signs that read, "Ya'll Means All!"

For those who don't speak southern, "Ya'll" is a second person plural pronoun, which English does not formally provide, but local usage does. Like New Jersey's "Yous guys," or in some parts of Pennsylvania where they say "You'ns." "Ya'll" literally means you all. All people have rights.

That phrase, "Ya'll Means All" fits in perfectly with our lessons because it is exactly the discussion the disciples were having in the early days of the church. Who belongs? Who will be treated differently in the church? Whom does God love?

This was a big point of contention among early Christians. Since it was a movement born out of Judaism - and in fact was still considered a Jewish sect at the time of this story - many felt that anybody who wanted to follow Jesus had to become Jewish first. And that included obeying laws that required a Jew not to eat at table with a gentile, let alone eat food that was considered unclean.

Peter was initially of that school. It's the rules, and we have to obey the rules. We've always done it this way. It's our tradition. We'll get in trouble if we start eating with Gentiles. They are not like us.

That is, until God has a word with him in a vision. He is offered all sorts of good food that is considered unclean by Jews, which he initially refuses to eat. But the voice in his vision says, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." We could almost add, "And God has made ya'll clean."

Peter understands his vision to mean that even the uncircumcised are clean in God's eyes. Then he starts to make connections with what Jesus had been saying all along. Like at the last supper when He said, "Love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, that you love one another." Peter understands now that Jesus didn't mean to just love the members of their little group but to love everyone whom God has made.

This is a mind-popping revelation for him - God's love applies to everyone - and it was not universally accepted by early believers, because, well, if you're not going to keep out the uncircumcised, who can you keep out? It's like you'd have to let just anybody in.

This has been the temptation of the church for millennia. For 2,000+ years, we've found creative ways to keep people out. And I don't mean just keeping people out of church membership; I mean out of God's love. For hundreds of years, we used the excuse of "They are not Christians" to justify denying the love of Christ to Jews, Muslims, Hindus - you name it. For centuries, within the church itself, we used gender, race, marital status, wealth, and gender identification among other things to determine who was in or out. Remember, it's within the lifetime of this parish that blacks and whites (or Asians or Native Americans) were universally allowed to worship God in the same space. Or that women could speak publicly in church.

But in the end - at least for us who follow Christ where he led - none of this is a question.

"Ya'll Means All."

Jesus never gave us a set of criteria to determine who was worthy of our love. There is no checklist that you go through to see if I should openly care for the needs of another. Jesus simply says, "they will know you are my followers by your love." And then he showed us that love by walking to the cross. Our path as followers of Christ is not easy. It is the path of love for those who are left out of love. It is the path that leads to the cross. And it is frightening. That fear is the tool of this world to keep us from following.

But there is inspiration, too. If you are afraid, if you are tempted to exclude others from the embrace of God's love - and your part in it. If you, like those early Christians, can't imagine how you can be a beacon of light in the darkness, just think of your brothers and sisters in North Carolina, standing witness to Christ in a hostile environment as they hold up those little signs that read:

"Y'all Means All."

Amen.