Let Your Love Cast Out Our Fear

Acts 15:1-19

Buckingham Church

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I know it is Lent, but I want to tell you about one of my favorite TV Christmas specials. It’s called “Shrek the Halls,” and if you have never seen it, I highly recommend it. If you have read the children’s books or seen any of the Shrek movies, you will know that Shrek is a fairy tale ogre, but not stereotypically an ogre, for he loves and has friends. However, he is ogre enough that he wants to keep to himself a lot and gets angry pretty quickly.

The ogre in this story, Shrek, has a friend named Donkey. Who is a donkey. Donkey is one of those friends whom you love but can be really irritating from time to time. Did I mention Donkey is married to a dragon? Just go with it! Shrek lives in a forest inhabited by many fairy tale creatures, like Pinocchio and Puss in Boots and the Three Pigs.

Now in our Christmas special, Shrek is trying to figure out how to make Christmas for his family, his wife and triplets. He has imagined a quiet evening at home with just the five of them. When suddenly Donkey and many of the fairy tale creatures burst into Shrek’s house bringing their own decorations and food and music and causing an enormous amount of chaos. After trying to keep going on **his** idea of Christmas, Shrek finally gets exasperated and retreats to the outhouse to think, eventually kicking everyone out of his home, only to discover that his wife and triplets leave as well to go with those they describe as “their family.”

Shrek’s vision of family was small, and he wanted to establish traditions that would include just them and exclude any other creatures and their ideas from his little world. I can sympathize with him, because I understand that when new people show up in your life, your home, your church, your club, things often change. They bring their own ideas and life experiences, their own pain as well.

They also can bring wonderful gifts, if we wait long enough and listen hard enough to discern them. But that inevitably means change.

Someone once said we should be careful about inviting Jesus to our home because Jesus inevitably wants to bring his friends. If you read the gospels, you know that Jesus’ friends include Roman soldiers and sex workers, tax collectors and people with mental illnesses, little children and foreigners and so many more. I’ve often thought our celebration of Holy Communion, with its quiet and controlled table, is not a great representation of most of the meals Jesus had during his ministry. While they might not have been quite as chaotic as Shrek’s Christmas dinner, I can’t imagine the feeding of the 5000 without a huge amount of ruckus!

In today’s reading from Acts, the early church has been trying to establish itself as a family, much like Shrek was, and so it tended to cocoon itself with people who were known and understood, who had similar traditions and background. But a few people, like Peter and Paul and Barnabas, were saying that **their** experiences told them that God wanted to shake things up a bit, not have all the old traditions but perhaps some new ones. They knew this might get messy, but the Holy Spirit by her very nature creates holy and vibrant messiness. Not everyone in the early community, despite what happened on Pentecost, was equally comfortable with the Spirit’s unruliness.

What happens in this little story in Acts, often overlooked for some reason, is a seismic change in how a religious community is formed. They were a bit tentative, wanting to preserve some traditions, but on the whole, they opened up the community to people of very different backgrounds and traditions. Saying that “the way we’ve always done things” may not necessarily be the way God needs it to be done, and, indeed, might interfere with the workings of the Spirit. The leaders of the early church got it, and they wanted to create something based in tradition but also very new. How wonderful! How unusual.

We humans are still folk who often don’t like change, who like our habits and traditions. And that sometimes goes double for religious communities, for churches. From little things, like needing to sit in the same pew every Sunday, to big things like insisting that new people who join us do things our way. We try to shut out the Spirit, because we just don’t want to change. But whenever the church shuts out the Spirit, it dies, because we were formed on Pentecost by a creative Spirit that pushes into the world with life-giving transformative eruptions. Shrek’s wife, Fiona, says “Christmas is not just about you or me or even the babies.” Church is not just about the folk already in it, or who have been in it for generations. And Puss in Boots tells Shrek “There’s no right way to do Christmas; you just do it.” Same with all the parts of the life of a church, as the leadership of the First Church of Jerusalem discovered when they listened closely not just to the original disciples like Peter but to Paul and Barnabas and people like the Roman, Cornelius, the Ethiopian eunuch, and the Greek widows in their midst.

In the weeks and months to come, we will be talking about what the post-Pandemic church will look like: the church in general and Buckingham church in particular. I want to encourage us to listen carefully to all the voices around us, as the folk in Jerusalem did. Not to be afraid of a little Spirit chaos, because that is a sign of life. The hymn we will sing in a moment, Al Carmines’ wonderful “Many Gifts, One Spirit” asks God to “let your love cast out our fear.” I, for one, am glad to work on managing my fear of the new and unknown, because I can’t wait to see what the Spirit has in store for us! Amen.