

Easter 5C, May 2, 2010  
Runnymede United Church  
“God’s Cut List”  
John 13: 33-35; Acts 11: 1-18

Immigrant child, Chicago poet, Carl Sandburg was once asked, ‘What is the ugliest word in the English language?’ Pondering, he replied: ‘The ugliest word in the English language is ‘Exclusive’.

Some would argue with Sandburg. An exclusive relationship - honouring a vow to be faithful - does not seem ugly. But Sandburg’s comment was rooted in immigrant experience, in which ‘exclusive’ meant excluded, not special.

Perhaps you recall being excluded from a group or activity, as adult or child. Perhaps you remember the assault on your self-esteem, how angry you felt, how harsh life seemed.

I will always remember a story a man once told in Bible Study: “I still think about the last time I cried. I was eleven, grade six, trying out for the school basketball team. I walked into the gym, knowing there would be a piece of paper tacked to the bulletin board. We called it the ‘cut list’. The coach put it there. Kids whose names were on the list were still on the team. Those whose names were not on the list had been cut - no longer wanted. My name was missing.

“I stood, staring at the list. There wasn’t much tact in its composition: the names of the best athletes at the top, others listed in descending order of talent. I squinted at the bottom, hoping against hope that my name would appear.

“I held myself together until I got home and I began to sob - couldn’t stop. For the first time in my life, I’d been told: ‘You’re not good enough.’ Being on the list meant everything at that age; if you were on the team, even as substitute, you were wanted. If you weren’t on the team, you might as well not be alive. I still remember how that felt.”

Being cut, excluded, is devastating. Sad to say, human beings have a penchant to exclude. But it seems God accepts us, imperfect as we are. God excludes, cuts, no one. Today’s readings are about learning to love one another in that way.

Sometimes we don’t even know when we exclude. But next Sunday is a day when many may feel left out. We’re beginning the week that leads to Christian Family

Sunday - AKA Mother's Day. I've long feared that day, remembering words my mother once wrote: 'Mother's Day is wonderful for many. But, for some, like those not able to be a mother or mourning the loss of a child, or parent, or dealing with broken relationships, it can be a day of tears.' My mother knew those tears: after my brother's death, our family's meltdown, she was on the cut list for Mother's Day; every May I felt her dread.

A helpful reminder, perhaps. What will Mother's Day be like for you? And how can you help others feel included?

Next Sunday will be a day for joy and tears, both. That's why the Church asks us to think in terms of 'Family Sunday', remembering we're all part of God's family, broader than any family we know. No cut lists.

Jesus says everyone will know his disciples by their LOVE....

Jesus did not say that all would know his disciples by whether they follow highly ordered liturgy or shout spontaneous 'Amens', whether they submerge adults in baptism or sprinkle water on infants. He didn't say that others know a Christian by whether you pray with eyes open, hands in the air, or eyes closed, hands folded. He didn't say your faith spills out for others to see because you are for or against abortion or same-sex marriage. He doesn't even say you have to be baptized before you gather at his table.

But he does say 'no cut lists' when he says: *Love one another as I have loved you.* How is that 'new commandment' connected to today's remarkable story from Acts? Remember Peter? What a roller coaster he's been on. From the horror of betrayal, that cock crowing three times, he has been transformed by resurrection power to emerge to lead the early church. From feeling unworthy, he has learned to trust God's grace flowing through him.

Then, one day, in prayer, comes a vision: a strange dream filled with wild animals, reptiles, birds; a voice saying, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat." It's difficult to grasp the shock of that vision for Peter – except, perhaps, for a vegetarian!

But Peter realized he was being asked to enlarge his world. *'It is not for you to call profane what God counts clean.'* Peter had never broken the purity laws from Leviticus to share a meal with a Gentile. But the God who sat with Jesus at table with outcasts is working through Peter: 'The world is changing.'

'Cut lists' - sometimes called purity laws - had served people well. But the resurrection brought something new, about which Paul would write: *'there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for all are one in Christ Jesus'*. Peter loves. The Holy Spirit works in Peter. The 'cut list' is deleted.

Colleagues would gather at Jerusalem to ask: 'How could you baptize a Roman?' – as he had done. Peter asks instead: 'What prevents him from being a full-fledged member of God's family?' The old answer cited law, obedience, custom, enmity, the language of exclusion. Peter's new answer cites love: *'Who was I that I could hinder God?'*

What a contrast this story of breaking down walls presents to the misery of exclusion! What does it teach us? First: God accepts, welcomes, treasures, all of us. God's bulletin board has no cut lists.

Second: we are sent, like Peter, into the world to invite, welcome, build up those on the outside. Think about this: How do people KNOW about God in the first place? They come to know because of how someone acts towards them. *Love one another as I have loved you.*

As a church, we practise that love, in trying to become more welcoming, in interfaith dialogue, in support for refugees, in the Obara family, when we act out of faith that goodness and hope can motivate us and others. God says: 'Live without excluding. Live without cut lists.'

Last week, American minister/theologian Kayla McClurg wrote about her country's struggle to accept new immigrants: 'Maybe if we risked living the rule of Jesus, we'd discover that there really is enough for everybody and that perfect love casts out fear and good order is accomplished when 'the last shall be first.' Maybe we just haven't put God's way into action yet.

...So if my country makes a law that says those who speak 'other' or in any way appear to be 'other' will be arrested if they don't carry proper papers, and God has a law that says I'm to lovingly welcome all who are "other" and treat them as citizens of the land as much as any of us--then whose law will I follow?"

Big questions. How do you answer? How do I?

Kayla concludes: "Maybe we'll get to a place where we no longer question who belongs, who doesn't."

*Love one another.* Incredibly simple, incredibly difficult, for our world is still a place of 'cut lists'. But the vision comes, a dream, confusing at first, hard to understand. Then we begin to realize it has to do with God, who is love, and says, "Go to those on your cut list. Love one another." Perhaps then, as we will sing, (God's) "grace, all sufficient shall be your supply."

This week, as we open our hearts to celebrate family, may we all be welcomed and welcoming. May Christ, alive in our hearts, give us courage and grace to dream more than we ever imagined about the most beautiful word in the English language: 'LOVE'.

'How Firm a Foundation' was part of our workshop on grief last Monday night. Let it now speak to us about the foundation God creates, that we might live by God's vision: No cut lists. Amen.