

I don't like boiled Okra. The taste is OK, but the consistency just chokes my throat closed. It kind of sits there in my mouth growing and growing. I only know one person who eats boiled Okra on purpose. And as luck would have it, that person is my wife. Several years ago, we had boiled okra. Now we've always said that our kids had to try everything. So, here they sit staring at me with this expanding piece of slimy stuff in my mouth. The thing I wanted to do was to spit it out, if it hadn't expanded too big for that. But, what message would that send the kids? So I swallowed it, and lived. I did it for Kari. It was the supportive thing to do. It was a loving thing to do. I still don't like boiled okra and Kari doesn't make me eat it. That's also a loving thing to do.

I don't know if that's the kind of loving Jesus means in John's Gospel, but in a way, I think it would be covered. John writes that the new commandment Jesus gives, the thing Jesus wants his followers to remember and do, is to love one another as he loved them.

It's interesting, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells the disciples to go into the nations of the world, baptize and teach, in a word, to evangelize and make disciples. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells the disciples to forgive and to preach repentance and reconciliation.

For John, it's all about love. We are to love others as Christ loved us. Well, how did Christ love the disciples and the horde of followers? He ate with them. Even with some unsavory people. He showed compassion, even to those who hated him. He washed the feet of the man who handed him over to death. He wept and laughed with his friends.

And, in the greatest act of love ever given, he died on the cross so that you and I would never have to face the gates of Hell. He died on that cross for you and me. He died on the cross for the religious elite who wanted him dead. He died on the cross for the man that hammered his

hands and feet to the cross. He died for the unborn children, waiting for their first breath. He died for those who hate and kill.

As an old litany hymn says, “Love that caused us first to be, love that bled upon the tree.”

And Jesus said, I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

That kind of love goes way past eating okra. Jesus new commandment means loving the unlovable even to the point of death. It’s not a passive, Barney sort of love, “I love you, you love me, we’re a happy family” No. This is the kind of love that leaps in front of a bullet. A love that offers up a kidney. A love that never forgets. The choir sings an anthem that just gives me goose bumps. It says, “Amazing love, how can it be that my god should die for me.

Amazing love. Christ’s love.

Now modern bible scholars would tell me not to do this since they would say that each Gospel stands on its own. I agree. But their all in the same book, so sometimes you have to look at the whole. If we look at the commissioning verses in Matthew, Luke and John, we see that Jesus commands us to Love with Amazing Love, preach and practice forgiveness and reconciliation and to make disciples of all the world.

If I love you enough to ask you to forgive me and me to forgive you, than I certainly love you enough to tell you about my relationship with Jesus. No matter what order you put these commandments in, they all come together with the Amazing Love of Jesus.

I want to look now at the story of Peter's vision and frame it in the context of Love for one another.

Peter's vision showed him animals that he was forbidden to eat because of the dietary laws in Leviticus 11. A voice tells him to kill and eat. Peter takes that to mean that dietary laws no longer applied. See, this all comes in the context of the early church's first crisis. Gentiles were starting to follow the disciples and even to be baptized.

What scandal! Men who had never felt a Moyle being dunked right along with properly trimmed Jews. We make light of it, but it was as big a deal, even a bigger deal than any of the stuff we're fighting about. Did Gentile men need to be circumcised and must they follow the dietary and ritual laws of Leviticus.

So, under the surface of Peter's vision is the question, "are Gentiles worthy of Jesus' Amazing Love?" Did Jesus die for them? How big is God's love?

Peter said that it is big enough to even include those who eat pork and lobster. Now, it's important, I think that we realize how big a deal this is. Leviticus 11 is real clear about what faithful Jews could and could not eat. Basically, it had to chew the cud and have hoofs. If it swam in the water, it had to have fins. If it flew in the air, it couldn't eat meat. And, surprisingly grasshoppers and locusts were OK. It's right there. Clear as day. If one eats these things, they are polluted, repugnant. To some fundamentalists, someone who violated the Levitical text was unworthy to the kind of Love the disciples experienced.

So, here's Peter, describing a personal revelation that is used to supersede the clear meaning of scripture. Peter's experience of the divine presence forced him, and eventually most

of the early church leadership, to read scripture in a new way. The amazing love of God shown in Jesus Christ did not depend on the food you ate. Peter would later say that it isn't what one puts into the mouth that makes one unclean, rather it is what comes out of the mouth that condemns.

I have a translation of the first 5 books of the Old Testament by a Jewish scholar, Everett Fox. In his notes for the book of Leviticus, he speaks of the dietary and ritual laws, as well as the laws concerning bodily functions as being about separation. These were things that Jews were to do and ways in which they were supposed to act in order to maintain Judaism as separate from the pagan cultures they would find themselves in during the exile and the great Diaspora.

Peter's vision and its acceptance by the Church Council breaks down that separation. See, in Jesus, we believe that the law and prophets had been fulfilled in his coming. The great exile was over. All of Judaism was reunited and brought home in the person of Christ. There was no separation. The Kingdom of God is here and those things meant to maintain identity until all was accomplished has done its task.

Jesus said, "See, I am making all things new". There is a new world view. There is a new reality. There is a new primary identity – Child of God. The old dividing lines have been erased. Jesus Love is too big for Leviticus. His outstretched arms encircled even the polluted gentiles and unbelievers.

When Jesus brother, James of Jerusalem, was acting as chief apostle, he decreed that Gentiles would be exempt from most of the dietary laws and, more importantly, the necessity for circumcision. Oh man. That was huge. That invalidated (at least in the eyes of some) the

covenant with Abraham. If the early leaders hoped to remain a reformation of Judaism, they nipped that idea. (sorry)

Seriously, that was an incredible statement. It would be done later in terms of animal sacrifice and Temple ritual. Especially after the second temple was destroyed in 70 AD, the ritual laws had to be adapted to fit the new reality.

The first apostles never guessed that Gentiles would want to share in the Love of Jesus as they did. So, there was a new reality and they had to adapt their understanding of scripture. Women were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to teach and the church adapted. The world was found to be round and the church adapted.

God chooses to reveal his ways to whomever God chooses. We can't always be sure if what we're hearing is from God. But I would think that if Jesus Commandment in John's Gospel is applied, we will find Jesus circling embrace to move ever outward until, someday, he has the whole world in His embrace.