In the passage that we just read in the Acts of the Apostles, Peter was confronted by a group of fellow Jews who were criticizing him for stepping out of his social, cultural, and religious norm by eating, talking to, and staying with the Gentiles. This was a shameful disgrace in the eyes of those who abided to the Mosaic law and considered themselves to be the chosen elite children of God.

 Peter explained that he had seen a vision and heard a voice from above who commissioned him to heal, to preach and to baptize those around him among the Gentiles. In this vision, Peter saw a large white sheet coming down from heaven and along with it all kinds of spiritually uncleaned four-legged animals, reptiles and birds – many of which the Jews were forbidden to come near, never mind killing and eating them. Peter was told to go, kill, and eat these uncleaned animals.

 How can this be? Peter asked,*“You know that I can’t kill and eat these unclean animals. Nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.”* But the voice from Heaven responded to him saying, *“What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Later on, Peter was confronted by three men asking him to baptize them and their entire household. They were Gentiles and now Jews. Since when had the Gentiles become a part of the chosen race? I thought that was only exclusively for the Jews. Have the Jews fallen out of God’s grace? No, not at all! As a matter of fact, the invitation was still open for all those who choose to “respond” in faith. Through the grace of God, the door to heaven has now been wide-opened, not just the Jews but for ALL people as well. This was a pivotal moment in human history as well as for the Judeo-Christian faith.

 Today we’ve entered into the 5th Sunday of Easter. During these 50 days of post-Easter period, we transition into a new season of reality, a new chapter in the story of retelling of Christ’s resurrection. Each day, as Christ’s disciples, we are being challenged by the Spirit, to fill in the details of this continuing story of resurrection and hope as being witnessed and re-told throughout our daily lives.

 As a matter of fact, many scholars considered the Book of Acts to be the 5th Gospel (after Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) because it picks up right where the other gospels left off. Christ’s story of resurrection does not end when he was raised from the death and even ascended into the Heaven to be with the Father. Christ’s story of salvation, resurrection, and hope is being re-told by the disciples, as empowered and enabled by the Holy Spirit. Many of the disciples carried on right where Christ left off, through the miracles of healing and baptizing of others not only by water, but by the Holy Spirit.[[2]](#footnote-2)  This is the continuing story of Easter.

This was a dramatic turn of events, as we entered into this new phase of the Jewish AND the Christian faith, where both must learn to co-exist, tolerate, and accept one another, in spite of their differences….and I’m sure there are plenty. This is the struggle that the early church must face in this post-resurrection era. Even to this day, the church still wrestles itself in dealing with ecumenical relations with other faiths AND also within our own, whenever we see things differently and carry on different values and beliefs.

 This was a trying time for many of these disciples, not knowing what the future may hold, as they enter into this uncharted territory of co-existence with those who are different from them. But they had faith that God is going to do according to God’s will. The Holy Spirit would empower them with the courage and boldness to carry out God’s vision for God’s people. **God is about make all things new! The eternal God is in the business of re-building and renewing our hope and our faith,** even if we may not share the same perspective and have the same mind.

 These post-Easter/Pentecostal events opened up a whole new way of seeing things, not from our human perspective, but from God’s perspective. The Holy Spirit reveals itself that it continues to be at work among us, re-shaping us into the people whom God wanted us to be. The Spirit wrestles with our hearts that may be once hardened. It opens our eyes so we may once again see God’s vision while ***“Making All Things New.”***

In light of the many worldly tragic events that occurred both in this country and around the world where there has been a great sentiment of xenophobia and fears against all foreigners, we often find ourselves instead of building “bridges” and relations among people of other faiths, races and ethnicities, we draw lines on the sand and re-construct new walls that divide and conquer among God’s people. Is this what Christ commanded us to do, as we profess to “love God” and to “love our neighbors as ourselves”?

 As Christians and citizens of this country, we found ourselves caught in multiple arenas of ethical, religious and social battlegrounds. What should our proper responses be, if we were called to exercise God’s universal love towards all people and to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us?[[3]](#footnote-3) Do we really mean what we pray for to “forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sinned against us”?

We always seem to know what’s the right thing to say and the proper position to take, but yet we find it troublesome to strike a balance between our actions and our conscience. We have failed from time to time to exercise God’s greatest love towards humanity, as demonstrated on the cross, in the midst of personal pride, human hatred and evil.

 **God’s LOVE breaks down all barriers and withstands all walls.** What God did on the cross through Christ was a universal act of love. It bore no distinctions between “them and us” because Christ died for all.[[4]](#footnote-4) It was an act of inclusive love for ALL of God’s people*. “For God so loved the WORLD, that He gave His only begotten Son…”* not just for the Jews, or the Gentiles but for the people of the WORLD. The Gospel is for everyone to embrace. Who are we to try to limit the mission of God to redeem humanity? Whose power do we assume?

 A couple of years ago, I attended a seminar on the theme of “Contextualization of the Gospel” in a pluralistic world. The attendees of this seminar came from all theological spectrums, kept our ears tuned and our minds opened to what we have to say to one another. The bottom line question we must ask of ourselves is, what does it mean to effectively communicate the message of the Gospel in today’s challenging context?

 The speaker talked about how that **Gospel Contextualization is an effort to bring personal relevancy and meanings to the Gospel message, to different people of different values, cultural upbringing, and traditions without compromising the authority of the essential values of the Scripture.** Gospel Contextualization is **NOT**, however, an effort to “water-down” the core essential values of Christianity into framing whatever we humanly see fits, based on our own interpretations and not of the Holy Spirit’s.

Come to think of it, if we go by that definition as stated before, all of us are “contextual” theologians to some degrees as we wrestle to draw personal understanding and interpretation of the scriptures every time we open up God’s Word. What does this passage mean to me personally anyway? How we read and understand scripture today will be different from what it was yesterday or the year before, because our lives and our experiences have changed. Our context may be shifted but God remains the same both yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

What spiritual lens are we putting on as read our Scripture, in light of what’s happening in lives, in our country, in our world today? How can we maintain spiritual accountability to the Gospel without compromising the integrity of our faith? That’s the challenge for us to be God’s faithful witnesses in this particular corner of the world, in the year 2016.

 In light of the Acts passage that we read today with Peter and God’s vision for the Gentile world. This was only a sneak preview of the Kingdom of God – a Kingdom that’s already here and is yet to come. It will come to full fruition when Christ returns once again. We are commissioned to be agents or ambassadors of God’s on-going activities in this world. By the virtue of our baptisms, we have received the power of the Holy Spirit to carry out acts of miracles and transformation, not only in our own lives but more importantly in the lives of those around us.

In his commentary to this passage, one theologian - Joseph S. Harvard summed up by saying, *“If there is hope for the church in these days when there is so much dissension and division in faith communities, then we must pray to have visions that bring us together to receive the gift of discernment. We need to be open to the work of God’s healing and reconciling spirit.*

 *Do we have anything to offer that differs from other groups characterized by dissension and division? Can we listen to each other and seek to discover where God’s Spirit is leading? Can we broaden the Heavenly banquet table so everyone has a place to dine?” [[5]](#footnote-5)*

 There is always room for a few more around the Heavenly banquet table, even if that might mean that we might be a little bit more crowded or perhaps a few less bits to eat. But God’s grace is sufficient for us to share with all those who want to receive it. Friends, God is **“Making All Things New”** through the work of the Holy Spirit. This is a gift, as well as a challenge, to the church and to you and I today.

 Through His grace, God has opened up new mission frontiers to those who seek after Him in faith. The Gospel is opened to all those who are willing to accept and believe. **Salvation is no longer achieved by the circumcision of the flesh, but by the circumcision of the heart.** As Moses reminded his people, that *the LORD our God will circumcise our heart and the heart of our descendants, so that we will love the LORD our God with all our heart and with all our soul, in order that we may live.[[6]](#footnote-6)*

 This is our new collective calling as we faithfully follow God’s leading in ***“Making All Things New”***. In the name of God the Fahter, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *Acts 11:9* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Acts 11:16* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Matthew 5:44* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Acts 11:12* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Harvard Joseph S., Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2, P.454*  [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Deuteronomy 30:6* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)