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Fiddler on the Roof gives us one of the most realistic, tender moments of cinema when Tevya asks his wife “Golde, do you love me?” The whole musical poses this question in a variety of ways. It portrays an arranged marriage of 25 years, young people with far more romance than prospects, and the question of how parents must juggle their love for children whose commitments clash with their elders’ beliefs and traditions — all in the midst of persecution. After considering her 25 years of washing, cooking, bearing children and laboring beside her husband, Golde answered Tevya “I suppose I do.” It was a well-thought-out response. With no stars in her eyes, Golde’s graying hair and calloused hands, her constant awareness of him and their children served as the evidence that verified her answer.

One of the unique features of today’s Gospel is that Jesus speaks for the first time of the disciples’ love for him. Previously he’s told his disciples that he is the way, the bread of life, the light of the world — all descriptions of himself that speak of what he wants to offer them. Jesus often called his disciples to believe in him and to trust him, but now he gets to the deep, interpersonal level of loving him for who he is. The only other time in the Gospels that Jesus speaks of disciples’ love for him is after the resurrection when he asks Peter if he loves him (John 21:15-16).

Jesus says his disciples demonstrate their love for him by keeping his commandments. On first blush, that hardly sounds like the Jesus who talks about mercy rather than sacrifice, who worried far less about the letter of the law than the spirit. But, we need to remember the context: This conversation began with matters of the heart not the law.

When Jesus talks to his disciples, to us, about loving him, he's talking about something more than ordinary friendship, even more than familial commitment or love between spouses. When we pay attention to the broader context we realize that he's talking about our loving him the same way he loves the Father. The love between Jesus and the Father is a mutual devotion born of their identification with one another. In Jesus' relationship with the Father, obedience has nothing to do with rules. It's about loving one another and sharing the same desire.

When Jesus talks about loving him he's inviting us to mysticism. Mysticism is a word many people shy from. The word makes folks think of heavenly apparitions, the stigmata, levitations and generally odd behavior. The word is so suspect in our tradition that the Catechism of the Catholic Church only mentions it once (#677), and that's in a footnote about "false mysticism." Rather than get all tied in knots about unearthly ideas, we might define mysticism simply as the experience of getting caught up in God's presence in our world. As theologian Richard Rohr explains in his book, *What the Mystics Know*, mystics are people who have "a learned capacity to recognize God within themselves, in others, and in all things." The mystic is anybody who finds union with God in real life — in the Eucharist, in moments of creativity or flashes of awe-filled wonder, in the overwhelming love that carries us beyond ourselves into the source of all life. We might say that every experience of grace is a mystical experience.

An intense feeling of grace is usually as fleeting as it is real but as Andrew Lloyd Weber's song explains, "Love changes everything." That's what Jesus is talking about in this reading. He's not telling the disciples to obey rules, he's inviting them to share his heart. The opening line of today's Gospel is, "If you love me, you will keep my commands." That's a request for love. All that Jesus did in his life was aimed at that one thing: to entice humanity into falling in love with God, and the way to do that is through loving him.

Today we might picture Jesus singing Tevya's words and asking us, "Do you love me?" For Jesus, love is the only thing that matters. Loving him includes accepting

him for who he is and what he offers. As he says in this reading, loving him brings us into the realm of his Spirit and allows us to share his own perspective and desire. In the opening line of this reading Jesus could just as well have said, “If you love me you will love what I love and want what I want.” Keeping his commandments is a matter of the heart, a heart willingly invaded by God.

ACTS 8:5-8, 14-17

Early Christian tradition often blended the stories of the apostle Philip with the deacon Philip who is mentioned in Acts 6, 8 and 21, giving us a hint that the roles of deacon and apostle were neither strictly defined nor indicators of status. The Philip of this narrative is one of the Hellenists chosen to see to the daily distribution, an unlikely candidate to have been one of the Twelve who walked with Jesus. But as we saw before, Philip the deacon is doing the ministry of an apostle.

Luke seemingly designed this reading at least in part to make the point that unlike the people in Jerusalem, the Samaritans “paid close attention” to preaching about Jesus and they accepted the Gospel with joy and one accord. That’s the good news. A rather tricky question comes up with the idea that Peter and John heard that the baptized Samaritans had not received the Holy Spirit. This isn’t a critique of Philip’s baptismal technique but an indication that rather than trying to formulate a sacramental theology, Luke is describing the growth of the community and faith itself as a process of development. As Luke tells it in Acts, the Spirit may come to people with the laying on of hands (8:15-16, 19:5-6), or even before baptism as was the case of Cornelius and clan (10:47-48). More to the point here is the fact that Peter and John, leaders of the Jerusalem community, confirmed the faith of the Samaritans. This is one more indication that the new community was based purely on faith; Judeans, Galileans, Samaritans, Gentiles no longer, Christians had to abandon old, worn-out distinctions among ethnic or sectarian groups. As we are preparing for the feast of Pentecost, seeing the way the early community grew in faith invites us to reflect on our own faith development. Perhaps those of us who were baptized as infants might identify with the Samaritans who apparently didn’t receive the full experiential effect of the faith all at once. As they grew in union with the entire community and received the laying on of hands from the apostles, their faith took on new dimensions. Others, like Cornelius and many of our present-day catechumens, experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit before “conversion,” and came to baptism already impelled by that grace. Finally, although Luke doesn’t

underline it, Peter and John had to be growing in their own process of faith as they confirmed Samaritans while being rejected by their co-religionists in Jerusalem.

Perhaps one of the underlying messages of this reading is a reminder of what Pope Francis has called the unruly freedom of God's word. The entire community is called to evangelize and none of us can predict who will accept God's word nor through whom the Spirit of God will choose to work.

1 PETER 3:15-18

The opening line of our reading, "Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts," may sound a bit strange to traditional Catholic ears. How might we sanctify *Christ*? And what does "sanctify" mean? The Greek word *hagiazō* (sanctify) means to make or recognize something as "holy," as different from that which is common or unclean. In the situation of the small group of Christians facing persecution this was a call to remember Christ, to hold on to his values and to preach them by their lives in spite of everything that surrounded them. It was a call to hope, to stake their lives on Christ just when evil's victory seemed certain.

In the 21st century, we might hear this as a reminder of just how countercultural the Christian witness must be if it is to ring true in our world. Obviously, before we can explain our hope, we have to understand just what Christian hope is all about. Hope isn't based in security or in rational optimism that bets that we have what's necessary to achieve our goals. In fact, it is precisely the opposite.

Hope trusts in God's transformative power which, as Paul says, goes beyond anything we could ask or imagine. Hope's breeding ground is the mucky space where possibilities and security have disappeared. Hope calls us to look directly at those mucky spaces, the lack of love, the poverty and violence that mark our world and to discover and proclaim the Gospel message in those very places.

We will never understand hope if we cling to our securities, keeping ourselves safe from the turmoil that surrounds us. Hope begins just after we have reached our limits. It is something we have to experience before we can preach about it, and the world will quickly see if we know of what we speak.

JOHN 14:15-21

In today's Gospel John returns us to our seat at the Last Supper. After calling on the disciples to trust him beyond all else, John has Jesus proclaim: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments and I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate." That might make us think someone is impersonating Jesus at the table. It's as if Jesus were saying, "If you behave yourselves I'll ask God to send you help." That is one way to interpret this Gospel fragment; it focuses our attention on the relative merits of our behavior with the hope that we can demonstrate enough virtue to pass muster. But that interpretation flounders when Jesus goes on to speak of a Spirit of truth that the world cannot perceive. The idea of putting in great effort, pulling your own weight and earning everything you get is exactly the system of the world — so the world should understand it quite well. Jesus must be speaking of something else.

When we listen carefully, we hear that Jesus isn't talking about obedience but about loving him. He's talking about the transformation that happens when, as Jesuit Pedro Arrupe is to have said, we fall in love with God "in a quite absolute and final way." Falling in love with another person changes our perspective, we see the world differently and understand everything in relation to the beloved. People who love one another often take on some of the characteristics of the other. Long-time married couples often even start to look like each another. Such love points toward what Jesus described here.

The love Jesus is talking about is devotion to the one who loved us first, whose love for us is immeasurable. This love is a commitment to the one who offers us a future of life beyond our imagining. The love Jesus is talking about orients absolutely everything else in our life. So when he says "If you love me you will keep my commandments," we could easily rephrase that to say, "If you love me you will share my perspective and desire."

John presents Jesus as saying this in the context of his farewell address to the disciples. Jesus knows, as do we the readers, that they are frail followers. If they haven't been able to comprehend him already, they will need even more help when he is no longer physically with them. John had all of us in mind as he recorded the rest of this conversation. Jesus promised the disciples he would ask the Father to send them "another advocate," the Spirit who would continue his role with them. Jesus described this Spirit as the Spirit of truth whom the world neither sees nor knows. The clear implication is that disciples do somehow see and know the Spirit.

To “see” implies a sense perception. Seeing is more than passive. “Seeing” involves taking in sensory data and organizing it, focusing on some things and ignoring others to give meaning to the light and shade and varied shapes within our range of vision. “Knowing” is non-material, it refers to the dimension of the mind and the spiritual. To know someone is not just to recognize a face or to be able to call her or him by name. Knowing involves relationship. To know others is to be connected with them. It implies that we understand the person from his or her own perspective. Knowing someone necessarily implies a degree of empathy, of feeling together. When Jesus states that disciples see and know the Spirit it’s simply one more way of drawing out the implications of their love for him. To the degree that they love him, they see as he sees and want his Spirit to animate them, to help them remain true to who he is calling them to be.

The role of the Spirit in the life of disciples is expressed quite beautifully in Eucharistic Prayer 4 which says: “That we might live no longer for ourselves but for him ... he sent the Holy Spirit from you, Father, as the first fruits for those who believe, so that, bringing to perfection his work in the world, he might sanctify creation to the full.”

Loving Christ opens us to the Spirit who empowers us to bring Christ’s work to completion. Or as Jesus said so simply, “If you love me, you will keep my commands.”

Planning: 6th Sunday if Easter

By: Lawrence Mick

This week’s readings suggest a continuation of last week’s focus on the mission of the baptized. Vatican II taught us that many different groups of people can be saved, even those who are not baptized, even those who are atheists. Therefore, baptism is not primarily about being saved or getting to heaven. Those who are baptized are called to carry on the mission of the church, and that mission, as we will hear next week, begins with spreading the good news to all the nations.

Today’s first reading recounts the spread of the Gospel among the Samaritans. Notice, by the way, that it was a deacon named Philip who initiated this mission (see last week’s column). And remember that Jews and Samaritans were enemies, which

reminds us how universally the Gospel message must be shared.

The responsorial psalm echoes this theme with its refrain: “Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.” The second reading also speaks of evangelization. “Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence ...”

The Gospel is not explicit about evangelizing, but it speaks of two key related points. Jesus calls us to keep his commandments, which includes the command to preach the good news. And he speaks of the gift of the Holy Spirit, who guides us in our efforts and opens the hearts of others to the Gospel.

You have the option today, if you celebrate the Ascension of the Lord next Sunday, to substitute the second reading or the Gospel or both from the Seventh Sunday of Easter for today’s texts. If you do so, they still can support a focus on evangelization. The reading from Peter’s first epistle speaks of glorifying God by sharing Christ’s sufferings; the witness of martyrs led many to Christ. In the Gospel, Jesus speaks of offering people eternal life, which he explains as “that they should know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ.”

Whenever you celebrate the Ascension, it would be appropriate to recommend to the assembly the tradition of a novena to the Holy Spirit leading up to the celebration of Pentecost. A novena, by definition, lasts nine days. If you celebrate the Ascension next Thursday, then the novena runs from Ascension to Pentecost. If you don’t celebrate the Ascension until next Sunday, people can still begin the novena this Friday. No formal prayers are needed; simply praying for the gift of the Spirit’s guidance will suffice. But you could print a prayer to the Holy Spirit in the bulletin this week.

Prayers: 6th Sunday if Easter

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Depending upon where we live, many of us are unaware of those who actually suffer because of their faith. But many circumstances can challenge our commitment: politics, economic choices, job decisions, or lifestyle. Like the early Christians, we are promised the guiding presence of the Spirit. How prepared are we to suffer for or

at least be uncomfortable with living the Gospel? How open are we to the Spirit's influence in our lives?

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you call us to keep your commandments: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you promised to send us the Spirit as our advocate: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you do not leave us alone in our commitment to you: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray now for the needs of the world and for our own commitment to fully live the Gospel.

Minister For the whole church: that we may stand in solidarity with all who suffer for their faith ... we pray,

- For peace in a world divided by politics and religion ... we pray,
- For the desire to be fully committed Christians in a culture that includes secularism and sectarianism ... we pray,
- For the honesty to question our own commitment to love as Jesus loved ... we pray,
- For those who fear the ramifications of living the Gospel ... we pray,
- For all graduates who are embarking upon next steps and may be questioning what the future holds ... we pray,
- For the poor and disenfranchised, the sick and the weary; and for all whose lives are fragile.
- For those who have lost loved ones ... (*names*); and for those who support them ... we pray,

Presider God who protects and walks with us, help us to remember your presence as we seek to live as committed Christians. Dispel our doubts and our fears while making us aware of those who need our support. We ask this in the name of your Son, who promised us your love. Amen.

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