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Scripture teaches us that the Holy Spirit works in subtle and mysterious ways, so when the Spirit fixed up a blind date between Peter and Cornelius, it turned out to be an encounter full of surprises for everyone involved. Today's first reading is one of those stories from the Acts of the Apostles in which Luke subtly highlighted the Spirit's activity while overtly assigning the inspirations to the angel who appeared to Cornelius and to Peter's dream-vision. Before our scene opened, an angel visited Cornelius, the pious Roman centurion, and told him that God had heard his prayers and he was to send for a man named Peter to learn what God had in store for him.

Meanwhile, Peter was napping on a roof. When he dreamed he was being offered all the luscious foods forbidden to Jews, his virtuous refusal to touch "unclean" delicacies was met three times over with the divine message, "What God has made clean, you are not to call profane!" Peter awoke to find Cornelius' servants at the door, inviting him to travel with them to Caesarea. We pick up on the story just as the devout Jew and the holy Roman meet one another for the first time.

As they got to know one another, Peter, on fire to convert the whole world, launched into a great homily for catechumens only to be interrupted by the Holy Spirit's descent upon his host along with the whole household. It was a bit of a rude comeuppance for Peter. The Spirit seemed to be showing Peter that he had traveled all that way not to bring God to good pagans, but to discover that God was active among them in ways Peter never would have guessed. He was called there to learn at least as much as he was to teach.

In the saga of the Acts of the Apostles, this story was one step in the arduous journey that Christ's Jewish disciples had to make to move beyond their cultural and religious biases. Although they were steeped in a spirituality that told them that as chosen people they were to be a light to the nations, they too often took that to mean that all the nations were to become like them and to practice religion in their way.

It would take a number of similar revelations before they realized that Peter's declaration that "God shows no partiality" meant that God could act through any part of creation, appear under the guise of any gender, speak any language and permeate every culture. Paul put it best when he told the Galatians that in Christ, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

In calling forth a new community in Christ, God's intention was obviously not to wipe out differences, but to manifest the multiplicity of ways in which divine love can be expressed. The reading from 1 John tells us much the same as it explains

that the purpose of Christ's coming into the world was not to start a church or establish particular ceremonies, but "so that we might have life through him." It also insists that anyone who loves is participating in the life of God.

The Gospel then presents Jesus reminding us that his one command to us is to love. He adds to that command the promise that, as we do so, we will share in his own joy.

Today's readings call us to widen our circles and learn about diverse ways of living and loving and expressing our faith. Our most important consideration comes from Jesus' dual message in the Gospel: We are called to believe that Christ loves us in the same way that the Father loved him, and the purpose of Christ's coming into the world was to share with us the joy of living in unbounded love. That summarizes the Christian vocation and mission.

The reading from Acts puts a concrete focus on that when it challenges us to open our minds and ask ourselves, "Who in God's creation could legitimately be considered a foreigner?" As we hear the story of Peter and Cornelius, today's liturgy invites us to be attentive to the wondrous diversity of God's self-revelation through nature, cultures and diverse faith traditions. It might just be time to pay attention to how the Spirit might be planning a blind date for us, to see how God might be trying to entice us into an unexpected encounter that can open our eyes, our minds, and most of all, our hearts.

After all, this is the Easter season, our 50 days of celebrating God's infinite surprises.

ACTS 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48

The scene Luke paints for us in the first reading is the culmination of events in which the Spirit of God inspired Peter and a pagan to seek one another out for the sake of the future God wanted them to initiate. It began with Cornelius, a devout and generous centurion to whom an angel came in a vision telling him to send for someone named Peter who was in Joppa, some 30 miles down the coastline from his home in Caesarea. While Cornelius' servants were on the way to find him, Peter went to pray and had an odd vision in which a voice seemed to be tempting him to eat forbidden foods. Righteous Peter protested three times only to be told three times that if God had created something, no one should call it unclean. At that point, Cornelius' messengers arrived and invited Peter to travel to meet their pagan master.

Upon discovering that, Peter launched into a theological reflection on what was happening. Giving us a scriptural example of the technique used by Catholic Action and Liberation Theology, Peter began the three-step process of see-judge-act. He summarized the situation in which they found themselves — his dream and Cornelius' vision — by confessing that he was discovering that God doesn't play favorites: neither in food nor in nationalities. He was discovering that there are no requirements for receiving God's favor beyond recognizing God's greatness and acting with justice. That was Peter's first step.

In the second step, Peter tried to tie what he was seeing into what his faith tradition had taught him. He began one of his typical homilies, showing the connections between the Jewish tradition and what God had

revealed in Jesus, then going on to explain the mission of Christ's disciples. It was a well-rehearsed speech, leading as always to the promise of the forgiveness of sin. Apparently neither God nor Cornelius needed to hear Peter's entire spiel; even as he was preaching the Holy Spirit came over the listeners in the same way the original disciples had experienced at Pentecost.

That experience doubled down on Peter's perception that God acts freely, being absolutely independent of preachers, rituals or the religious or social status of a person. Peter's third step was to baptize the group, recognizing that for Cornelius' household, the ceremony was not so much a sign and sacrament of conversion, but a ritual recognition of what God had already accomplished in them.

This reading offers a vital message to us who hope to be evangelizers. It is a call to begin every encounter by recognizing what God is already doing in a people. While it is easy to focus on the good news, God has been there before we arrived and intends to teach us more than we can teach others.

PSALMS 98:1, 2-3, 3-4

The verses chosen for today's psalm response ironically refocus a hymn of gratitude for God's care for the chosen people

and turn it into a song about the universal scope of salvation.

We have so often recited and sung the first verse that it may be an oxymoron for us to repeat “Sing to the Lord a new song.” But that would only be true if we stick obstinately to what we think we know and thereby close ourselves off to what God might reveal — if we were only willing to let ourselves believe a little more.

The second stanza of the psalm takes us back to Peter at Cornelius’ house and invites us to contemplate the ways in which other peoples have been touched by the Spirit of God who refuses to be confined to one tradition or denomination.

If we would take the third stanza seriously, we might look to other cultures and even other faith traditions to learn more about how to sing joyfully to God. What might we learn from Latin American processions or African dances? How might we find the chant of Tibetan monks an inspiration for prayer and the Byzantine reverence for icons a new window into the sacred for ourselves? Although foreigners can never adequately interpret much less fully comprehend another culture’s religious experience, the God of all creation reminds us that salvation comes in many ways and all peoples should celebrate it with practices that are authentic to their own culture. As we appreciate that reality, we will sing our thanks to God for revealing saving power in so many diverse guises.

1 JOHN 4:7-10

We hear about the mystics — saints whose prayer sustained them even to the point of losing their need for food or who became so caught up in God’s presence that they levitated and lost their sense of time and place. Most of us rarely think about that kind of experience, much less aspire to it. Today’s selection from 1 John offers us a much more down-to-earth mysticism — one available to all human beings even if they don’t recognize it for what it is.

With no hesitation or qualification John says, “Everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God.” He didn’t say, “Every Roman Catholic,” or even “every really good person,” but everyone who loves. Every single person who experiences that dynamic of giving self for another is experiencing the life of God within them.

Some commentaries take pains to insist that the passage is directed to Christians, and thus the love that expresses God’s life is love that is consciously Christian. But the author of 1 John goes on immediately to point out that God sent the Son into the world to give life — and one of the key points of today’s first reading is the reminder that we should never presume to limit God’s intention. The message seems clear: Love is of God and everyone who loves is participating in God’s life.

The dynamic of having life through Christ becomes clearer in the two verses which follow our selection. Verse 12 says, “No one has ever seen God. Yet if we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us.” The idea of love coming to perfection reminds us that we are creatures who grow and evolve. The life of Christ within us is no fait accompli, but a living relationship in which our life becomes more and more permeated by love and therefore by divine life.

Now, when we have moved past the half-way mark of our Easter season, this selection from 1 John invites us to remember that the power of Christ’s risen life can grow in us to the extent that we open ourselves to the grace of greater loving. John’s insight is as old as God’s proclamation through the mouth of the prophet Jeremiah: “I will place my law within them” (31:33), and as modern as commentators on the thought of Teilhard de Chardin, who proclaim that love is the energy of evolution, drawing all of creation forward into God’s future.

The last idea we find in today’s reading from 1 John reassures us that the love we know, the love we can share, has its origin in God and its finest demonstration in Christ’s coming as God’s expression of mercy for sinners.

We can appreciate this selection in the simplest way possible by just letting its obvious message wash over us. We can also meditate on it, study its implications for the moral and spiritual life and see how it grounds everything else we would teach and preach in Christian theology. Most of all, this reading assures us of God’s love for us and of our innate ability to love; it promises that the more we love, the more we will know of God.

JOHN 15:9-17

Today's Gospel gives us a seat at the Last Supper table where Jesus is making his farewell address. This was his moment to tell his disciples how important their relationship with him had been and would become. As was his habit, Jesus circled the same themes in various ways, finding enough metaphors and images for everyone to get the point.

This reading begins with an astounding statement: "As the Father loves me, so I love you." That's another way of saying, "I love you as an integral, intimate part of my own identity. I could not be who I am without you."

Then came the invitation: "Remain in my love." The word "remain" can also be translated as "abide" or "live." It expresses Jesus' request that we return the love he is giving. To abide in his love implies a double sense of both receiving life from him and dwelling in him. Far more than any sort of companionship, this is Jesus' request and invitation that disciples, among whom most of us hope to number ourselves, cultivate a relationship with him that makes them ever more conscious that he is the source of their life. Abiding in him allows his approach to life, his values, his loves and desires to take root in us. He is inviting us to relate to him in the same way as he relates to the Father.

The concrete example he gives of this is the request that we keep his commandments just as he keeps the Father's. When we look at his life, we do not find him concentrating on rules but living out of the heart of his relationship with God. For Jesus to keep God's commands was not a question of law but of sharing the Father's deepest desires and acting on them in his own life. That relationship with the Father was not only his source of life, but also, as he says here, his joy — the joy he wanted to share with his disciples as well. In that same vein, he tells us that he doesn't look to us to be his servants, but his friends — people who share his own heart's desires.

Then comes the apostolic commission. Unlike what we hear in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus does not give disciples a mission job description. There's no command to preach, baptize or heal. All Jesus tells us to do is bear the fruit that springs from love. That, of course, is a job description without limits. But he also gives us an unlimited promise of support, assuring us that when we ask the Father anything in his name, in other words, whenever we desire to unite ourselves more deeply to him and his purpose, the Father will grant our petition.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus left with the promise that he would always be with us. Here he promises not just to be with, but that his life can flourish in us.

Planning: 6th Sunday of Easter

By: Lawrence Mick

Today's readings again invite us into the heart of the mystery we name as God. The first reading speaks of the gift of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us and in whom we dwell. The second reading from 1 John is a central passage about love, a passage we might well meditate on every day.

The goal of true religion is not just learning doctrines and following moral principles. Those are important, but they are not the heart of the matter. The main purpose of religion is to unite believers with God, or perhaps more accurately, to help people recognize that they are already united with God though they may not realize or respond to that fundamental truth. Conversion is really a process of learning to see clearly the presence of God in our world and in ourselves.

This is, as we noted last week, not simply an intellectual recognition; it must be an experience of God's presence as a loving encounter with the Source of all that is. That's why more people are drawn to God by the experience of the love of others than by logical arguments.

Today's readings emphasize the importance of love. The second reading from 1 John insists that love is the key to life. "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love." What a stunning insight! When we experience love, we experience God. When we love others, we reveal God to them.

This is not love as an emotional feeling (though sometimes that accompanies true love), but as an other-focused self-giving. So, 1 John goes on to remind us: “In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him.” God’s self-giving is expressed first in creation itself and later in sending the Son into our world. The first step is always God’s: “In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us.” Our love of God and others is a response to God’s love for us.

The Gospel echoes that theme: “As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love.” The first reading reminds us that God’s love extends to all people, not just our own kind. “God shows no partiality.”

The last line of the Gospel is our mandate: “This I command you: love one another.” Let the music and prayers this Sunday echo these scriptural insights and imperatives.

Prayers: 6th Sunday of Easter

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

The more profound things are, the simpler they seem to be. The essence of the Gospel and this season coalesces in today’s focus on God’s love for us and the commandment to love one another. This may seem far too simple; but the reality is amazing and a little terrifying. If we are honest, we know both the impact and the cost of this kind of love from our personal experience.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you showed the disciples the depth and extent of God’s love: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you commanded them to love one another: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us, too, to keep this great commandment of love: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray for a world where love is often suspect and in short supply.

Minister For the church: that it may be a visible sign of God’s unending love for the whole human race ... we pray,

- For those who are witnesses to love in the most difficult situations and at great personal risk ... we pray,
- For those who think that power is greater than love, or who believe that love is merely sentimental ... we pray,
- For the wisdom to teach our children and youth that love reveals God, involves self-giving and sacrifice and yet, may gain nothing in return ... we pray,
- For the humility and gratitude to accept Jesus’ words of love reminding us how much the Father loves us and for the courage to be witnesses to that love wherever our lives lead us ... we pray,
- For those among us most in need of love, especially the sick and grieving, the discouraged and depressed; and for the courage to discern whether our parish ministries demonstrate love where it is most needed ... we pray,

Presider God of love, you have shown yourself to us through Jesus and in whatever love we have experienced in our lives. Help us to love others with the same generosity with which you have loved us. We humbly ask this in the name of your Son, whose love is without bounds. Amen.

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