



Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 21, 2017

Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish

Today's Scriptures

During his last supper with his disciples, Jesus used his remaining time to remind them of the essentials, the things he wanted them to know and remember when he was no longer with them. Jesus told his disciples who he was, how important they were to him, and how they were to carry on once he was gone. Today's Gospel is part of that final discussion. It contains Jesus' final thoughts and instructions for his disciples, all conveyed with great tenderness. This is his message: If you love me, this is what I would like you to do when I depart from the world. There is a way that I will remain with you.

When Jesus was with them, the disciples drew their strength and power from him. On their own, their faith often faltered and they continued to experience doubt, confusion, and even betrayal. As Jesus warned them of his impending death, he promised that he would not leave them stranded and alone, like orphans. He would ask the Father to send them "another Advocate," the Spirit of truth who would be with them always. Just as Jesus had made it possible for them to experience the Father through him, the Spirit would allow the disciples to experience Jesus within them. If his disciples kept his commandments out of love for him, that love would invite and allow the Spirit to gather them into the life of Jesus and the Father. Jesus would continue to reveal himself through the Spirit, and through the Spirit, he would continue to strengthen and empower them.

Throughout the Acts of the Apostles, it is evident that the Spirit was active in the lives of the disciples, just as Jesus promised. Today's passage describes Philip's move into Samaria. The Samaritans were one part of the kingdom of Israel but after they were conquered, their beliefs and practices changed. For centuries, the Samaritans were despised and avoided by the Jews for abandoning Israel's covenant with God. Philip was one of the Spirit-filled men mentioned in last week's Gospel. His love for Jesus prompted him to take the Gospel to the Samaritans. When they heard Philip's preaching and witnessed him healing the sick and casting out unclean spirits in Jesus' name, the Samaritans asked to be baptized in Jesus' name. Hearing this, the Apostles came to lay hands on them so the Samaritans, too, could be filled with the Spirit and strengthened and empowered in their relationship to Jesus. As hearts and minds were opened through the Spirit, the Church continued to grow.

The recipients of Peter's letter were undergoing persecution for their faith. The author reminded them that when Jesus obeyed the will of his Father, the Spirit brought him through suffering into new life. This same Spirit would transform them, even as they suffered for doing what is good. As they clung to Jesus as Lord, their hope was a powerful witness to the world around them.

Sunday Readings and Backgrounds

Reading I: Acts 8:5-8, 14-17

They prayed to receive the Holy Spirit.

- In today's first reading, we discover how people come to hear and believe in Jesus.
- The people in Samaria believed in Jesus and were baptized.
- Peter and John came from Jerusalem to pray over the Samaritans and lay their hands on them; a prayerful gesture of intercession and blessing that is still part of the Church's sacramental rituals.

Responsorial Psalm: Ps. 66: 1-3, 4-5, 6-7, 16, 20.
Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.

Reading II: 1 Peter 3:15-18

Christ died for sins once for all.

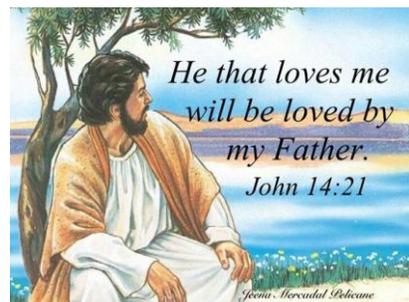
- Today's second reading, from the First Letter of Peter, speaks of how Christians are to live.
- The passage ends with a reference to the Resurrection.
- The risen Christ lives a new and glorious life that we who have been baptized in his name and sealed with the gift of the Spirit will also receive.

Gospel: John 14:15-21

If you love me, obey my commandments.

- Today's Gospel is taken from Jesus' farewell address to his disciples.
- The author of today's Gospel emphasizes the union of Jesus with the Father and with believers.
- In Jesus, believers also stand in relationship with the Father. This relationship is made possible and real through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

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Do You Love Me?

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.

Mary McGlone, Celebration Magazine, May 2017. Reprinted with permission.

☆ John 14:21

One who has my commandments, and keeps them, that person is one who loves me. One who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him, and will reveal myself to him.

