

*Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration*

## The Sixth Sunday of Easter

*May 6, 2018*

*Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish*



### *Today's Scriptures*

The early days of the Church was a time of new experiences, growth, and much learning. The early disciples were profoundly affected by the reality of Jesus' resurrection and by the coming of the Holy Spirit. Under the Spirit's guidance and power, they worked hard to recall and understand all that Jesus had taught them. Today's Gospel is taken from Jesus' discourse with his disciples at the Last Supper. These words would have been especially poignant and of utmost importance for the disciples because they were the teachings and instructions that Jesus chose to emphasize before his death. The excerpt from the first letter of John is a meditation on God's love. It reflects the Christian community's maturing understanding of the love of God made explicit in the life and sacrifice of Jesus. Recalling Jesus' words and reflecting on them was a critical activity of the Spirit in early days of the new church, which promoted growth in the disciples and guided their growing community. However, recollection, study, and meditation weren't the only ways that the Spirit taught the disciples. Sometimes, the Spirit taught through unexpected encounters with the truth of God's plans and intentions.

The action in today's first reading began with a weird and insistent vision given to the Apostle Peter. He dreamed of a sheet full of animals being lowered before him with an invitation to eat them. Peter resisted this vision, as eating these animals was forbidden under Jewish Law, but a voice told Peter that he was not to reject that which God had made clean. While Peter was still struggling with the meaning of the vision, he learned that he was about to receive visitors. The visitors were representatives of a Roman centurion, Cornelius, who was instructed by an angel to send for Peter. Today's reading describes their encounter but it omits the verses where Peter admitted that his puzzling vision from God had allowed him to set aside the demands of Jewish law in order to visit a Gentile's home. Seeing the openness to God in Cornelius and his family, Peter realized that salvation was not to be limited to the Jews, but was available to all, without partiality. As Peter began to preach the Gospel, the Holy Spirit descended on the Gentiles gathered to listen to him. Peter and his Jewish companions were astonished by this but seeing irrefutable evidence that God's Spirit's now filled them, Peter, guided by the same Spirit, made the decision to baptize Cornelius and his household without requiring them to adhere to Jewish law as a prerequisite for baptism.

Sometimes the Spirit works through the heart and mind, as it did when the disciples recalled Jesus' teachings and meditated on their meaning. Yet even for disciples, God's ways can be hard to grasp. Sometimes, the Spirit reveals and accomplishes more when we are surprised by the work of the Spirit in action. Seeing God at work fills us with awe, melts our resistance, and challenges us to see people and situations from his perspective of love.

### *Sunday Readings and Backgrounds*

#### **Reading I: Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48**

**A person from any nation is called to follow Christ.**

- In the first reading, it is evident that the early Church found it hard to accept that God's plan for salvation was not limited to the Jews.
- The vision in Peter's dream prepares him for his meeting with Cornelius, a Gentile.
- Peter baptizes Cornelius and his household, and he declares that God is not partial but loves all people.

#### **Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 98: 1, 2-3, 3-4**

**The Lord has revealed to the nations his saving power.**

#### **Reading II: 1 John 4:7-10**

**Let us love one another.**

- The reading from 1 John is part of a series of statements that end with the crucial reminder that love comes from God.
- The author wants to point out how much God loves us.
- God demonstrated the extent of his love by sending his Son to give his life for us.

#### **Gospel: John 15:9-17**

**So I have loved you.**

- Today's Gospel continues the theme of love with the message that God has loved us, so therefore, we must love one another.
- Love demands all we are, to the point of giving up life for the sake of another.
- God is the source and object of our love.

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# A New Community

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 in store for him.

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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.