

Homily - 6th Sunday of Easter (B) - Mother's Day
St. Monica's: 8:30 A.M., May 10, 2015

Acts of the Apostles 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48 - *When the Holy Spirit chooses Cornelius' household, Peter cannot deny them baptism.*

Psalm 98 *All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of God.*

1 John 4:7-10: *God is love: therefore love is the only way to participate in the life of God. God loves us first.*

John 15:9-17: *Jesus models for us self-giving love, and calls us friends: he desires us to go out and bear the fruits of love.*

So much is happening in our community this weekend! Liturgically, it is the sixth Sunday of Easter, and our readings are rich with the promise of Pentecost. Next Saturday morning, Monsignor Frank Leo will be coming, in the name of our Archbishop Christian Lepine, to bestow the Sacrament of Confirmation on 37 young members of our parish, invoking upon them the fullness of the Holy Spirit and releasing the gifts they will need to live as mature Christians in the church and in the world. We have great reason to rejoice!

How is the Spirit moving in our community today? What signs can we see that God is alive and well, inspiring us to do works of courage and mercy and kindness? And what light is shed upon this call to love by the readings to which we have just listened? Today's first reading is of extraordinary significance for the whole subsequent history of the Church. In it, we meet Peter, the chief of the apostles, in the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. As the saying goes – "what's wrong with this picture"? Most of us know that at the time of Jesus, relations between Jews and Gentiles – and especially their Roman occupiers – were complicated and conflictual. Living in the multicultural, multi-religious Canadian mosaic, we have become accustomed to remarkable social, cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity – so much so that we often have difficulty naming and articulating and living out our own beliefs in this context.

At the time of Peter, however, words like "Jew" and "Gentile" did not simply mark two out of a hundred ways of being in the world. Like many names, they defined mutually exclusive groups that did not mingle socially. Dietary laws forbade table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles. So what to do when Gentiles expressed interest in the teachings of Jesus and desired to become "followers of the Way" was a real and serious problem.

For Christians, table fellowship was an important bond to unite the community that gathered to remember Jesus "in the breaking of the bread." So understandably, Peter hesitated when Cornelius approached him; on the one hand, he had this intuition that "God shows no partiality"; on the other, his entire history of religious observance made Cornelius' request seem impossible. If we read the full story in the Acts of the Apostles, we are told of a dream that Peter has at this time: a huge net filled with animals "clean and unclean", kosher and unkosher if you will, and a clear invitation to "kill and eat." (We'll leave the animal rights concerns aside for a moment!) When Peter hesitates to do so, he hears a voice saying to him: "what God has declared clean, you must no longer call unclean."

So Peter agrees to go to Cornelius' house – and surprise! – the Holy Spirit is flowing! No bishop, no apostle, no sacraments as we now define them – but clear as day, the Holy Spirit is alive and well in this room, among these "strangers", "foreigners", "Gentiles". Peter realizes – how could we refuse to baptize – that is, welcome into community and table fellowship – these people who are so obviously filled by the Holy Spirit? Later on, an assembly of the apostles in Jerusalem confirmed the work that both Peter and Paul were doing among the Gentiles. In this way, the Church was set free to grow beyond its Jewish roots and foundations to become truly Catholic": that is, universal, open to the manifestation of the Holy Spirit wherever the Spirit blows.

Paul would later canonize this radical equality of all believers in that stirring phrase: "there is no longer Gentile or Jew, servant or free, male or female: for all are one in Christ Jesus." The Spirit of Jesus is a Spirit of radical inclusivity and welcome: all who are willing to be led by the Spirit are welcome in the community of believers. As we sang in our Psalm today: **"All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God!"**

This message is echoed in the invitation to "love one another" we hear from St. John in both the second reading and the Gospel. What is interesting is that both texts are founded in the premise that love is something we have to receive before we are able to give it. "In this is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us first." And what is the supreme sign and expression of that love: "God so loved the world that he sent his only Son."

Listen to what Jesus says about love in the Gospel today. He does not focus on feelings of love, or even so much particular actions. Love is

something in which we are invited to “abide”. Just as Jesus abides in the Father’s love, we are invited to draw life from our relationship with Jesus, who loves us first, and most, and unconditionally. This love does not need to be earned, or merited, or deserved; it needs to be welcomed, and celebrated, and treasured. It is meant to be for us a source of joy, and a source of strength; from God’s love, we draw our capacity to love: love of self, love of God, love of one another.

Jesus says something else about love which is very challenging: “there is no greater love than this, to lay down your life for your friends.” Jesus calls us to share in divine friendship. He holds no secrets; he wants to share with us everything he has learned from the Father. And part of that secret is that love sometimes hurts. Love means being ready to make sacrifices, to sometimes put the needs of others before our own. This does not come naturally to us. We are, quite naturally, self-centered. To love in this way is not something we come up with by ourselves. It needs to be modeled for us, given to us, so that we can give it to others.

This connects us with that other great feast we celebrate today: Mothers’ Day! For many of us, this lesson of love has been taught to us and modeled for us first, and foremost, by our mothers. This is not to in any way reduce the importance of fathers, and grandparents, and teachers, and mentors, and friends, and all those other people who channel God’s loving acceptance to us in so many different ways. But Moms are special. They need to be celebrated. Their work is difficult, and challenging, and often not recognized by society, or sometimes even by their own children, at the time. But the investment of love and self-sacrifice and care and nurture of so many mothers is a powerful force indeed, perhaps the most important predictor of future health, stability, and happiness in their children. It is so easy to take our mothers for granted – much as we take God for granted – and often, like God, they don’t even take it personally or hold it against us.

Much as Thanksgiving is celebrated once a year as a reminder to cultivate an attitude of gratitude **every** day, so too Mothers’ Day comes each year to remind us that maternal love is a unique and special gift of God, one that has the power to channel the radically inclusive, radically personal, radically liberating love that our God, who is both Father and Mother, bears for each of us. It is also fitting that we celebrate it May, a month in which we especially honor Mary as Mother of Jesus AND as Mother of the Church, Mother of all believers. Of course, mothers are human, and therefore imperfect. Many of us have very positive memories and experiences of our mothers, but for

some, the journey of motherhood has been painful or ambiguous. This is especially true when for reasons of death, illness, separation, or estrangement, we were deprived of the love and acceptance and encouragement we craved from our mothers. It can also be difficult for mothers – especially in this age of “Supermom”, the full-time working parent who is also expected to care for the home and nurture the children – to measure up to all the expectations we place upon them. So yes, mothers – especially as they become burdened with the challenges of advanced age or illness – need our compassion, and respect, and loving care, and our prayers. They cared for us in our vulnerability and dependence, and so too do they deserve the same care and concern from us, their children.

I have always remembered a poem that hung in the kitchen of my grandmother, who died in 1984: **“Mothers write onto the hearts of their children what the rough hands of the world can never erase.”** So on this Mother’s Day, let us be thankful for the gift of our mothers and grandmothers: those still living, and those now resting in the arms of God; those who gave birth, and those who nurtured; those who gave up their opportunity to shine, and who dedicated themselves to caring and nurturing for us, for a whole generation. May all mothers receive the reward of their labor of love. !

CELTIC BLESSING FOR MOTHERS’ DAY

**THERE IS BUT ONE AND ONLY ONE,
WHOSE LOVE WILL FAIL YOU NEVER.
ONE WHO LIVES FROM SUN TO SUN,
WITH CONSTANT FOND ENDEAVOUR.
THERE IS BUT ONE AND ONLY ONE:
ON EARTH THERE IS NO OTHER.
IN HEAVEN A NOBLE WORK WAS DONE,
WHEN GOD GAVE US A MOTHER.**