

***FIRST IMPRESSIONS*** 6<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER (B)

ACTS 10: 25-26, 34-35, 44-48 Psalm 98 1 JOHN 4: 7-10 JOHN 15: 9-17

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The Acts of the Apostles is a narrative that is more about the “Acts” of the Holy Spirit; with the apostles and first Christians playing a collaborative (though not always!) role. The Holy Spirit is God’s active presence among us and a reminder to the infant church that, as Jesus has promised before he departed, they would be “clothed with power from on high” (Lk 24: 49).

Jesus’ promise wasn’t just a pat on the back or something encouraging to say to comfort his disciples as he was departing. Nor were his parting words telling them to do what he taught and showed them – as best they could. Rather, he promised to send them power, the Spirit. The Spirit that did come upon the assembled community (Acts 2: 1ff.) was “fire” and like “a strong driving wind.” They would need that divine energy, as we do, to fulfill Jesus’ plan to have the Reign of God announced to all peoples. The Spirit’s driving force urged the church out into the world to speak and act in Jesus’ name.

In today’s first reading we hear about one of the places the Spirit drove Peter and how he recognized God’s presence among the Gentiles. Cornelius was a centurion in Caesarea. He and his “whole household” are described as “God fearers,” people who accepted Jewish monotheism and ethics and may even have attended the synagogue. Still, Cornelius was a Gentile and so not someone Peter and the others in the community would have thought to be included in God’s plan of salvation. Remember, even after Jesus’ departure, his followers were still a group within the larger Jewish community.

But prior to today’s passage we learn of Cornelius vision in which he was instructed to send for Peter (10: 1-8). Peter also had a vision (10:9ff.) and so when two messengers come to Peter to invite him to Cornelius’ house, he responded. How could Peter deny the obvious? Two visions, one to Cornelius and the other to Peter, affirmed God’s plan: the Gentiles were to be included into the community of Jesus’ followers. As proof, when Peter arrives at Cornelius’ house, he meets the devout man and his household, and another Pentecost happens – the Holy Spirit descends on those “who were listening to the Word.”

Let me see if I've got this right. The Holy Spirit comes upon listeners to the Word of God. Now the Spirit is by no means limited by structures and ritual. Remember Luke's description of the Spirit at Pentecost, as "noise like a strong driving wind," and then as tongues "as of fire" (2:1-3). The Spirit is not boxed in, but is as free, pervasive and penetrating as wind and fire.

Still, today's Acts reading calls our attention to this moment in our liturgical celebration, the Liturgy of the Word. It reminds us that when the Word of God is proclaimed in the assembly, the Spirit moves among and within us – like fire and a "strong driving wind," to breathe new life and determination into our faith so we, like the first Christians, can leave our gathering to live and proclaim Jesus Christ in the world. God has a big plan for our world, and we are to be God's collaborators in that plan.

So, let's receive the Word of God and its accompanying Spirit with open minds and hearts. If the Spirit could open Peter and the early church's world to receive the Gentiles into communion with them, who knows what new thing the Spirit might do in our sometimes boxed-in world and church!

The morning newspaper today reports that the World Health Organization warns that there is an imminent danger of a swine flu endemic. That is serious and many nations are making efforts to protect their population. If an endemic does happen many people throughout the world will suffer – as will God's reputation. As with other large events in nature, earthquakes, tsunamis, droughts, etc., if an endemic happens we will probably call it an "Act of God." God is blamed for a lot of the bad things that happen in the world; do we really believe God sent a cyclone that destroyed a Texas town and killed people? Is that how God uses God's power?

As a believer I do know a powerful "Act of God" – God has entered our world, joined us on our human journey, not avoided our pain and death, rose and given us a new life. The Gospel names another powerful act of God: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Which is what Jesus did for us. Now that act of love is what I would call an "Act of God!"

We don't come to pray to please God; earn God's love and good will; wear God down so as to earn a favor from God. Jesus' life, death and resurrection is a clarion message to us, one we are eager to hear again today: God already loves us.

We didn't love God first and then God returned the favor and now loves us because we deserve that love. Rather, God loved us first. If we have any doubts, look at Jesus. The real issue is: since God already loves us and has given such powerful evidence of that love, what should we do to show we heard the message; to show that our lives are transformed by that free gift of love? We see obvious signs in a person when they are in love; they radiate the love by being more cheerful, spontaneous, patient, kind, etc. These virtues seem to flow out of them with little effort, as second nature. What virtues will flow out of us because God loves us?

Today when we ask, "Jesus, what can I do to show your love for me?" He answers, "Keep my commandments." Our mind tends to run to the Ten Commandments as we ask ourselves if we have broken any of them. Have I done anything wrong? But we had the Ten Commandments without Jesus. He isn't talking about violating the Commandments, about not doing something negative. Instead, he is telling us to do something positive: "Love one another." That's one commandment with many faces; many opportunities to put into practice what we have experienced from God in Jesus, unconditional love.

If there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for a friend, then I can respond to Jesus' command by asking myself; what part of my life must I "lay down," let die, for the sake of another? My prejudice, unwillingness to help, angry feelings, envy of what others have, the list of wrongs I keep against a person, my material goods, etc? Jesus doesn't enumerate a list of commandments we can check off one by one and then say, "There, I have done that."

Instead, he names a broader commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you." Can we ever say we have lived up to that command? Can we check off items and say, "Well, I've accomplished that!" No, because love asks a lot of us. When can a husband or wife say, "There, I have loved you, there is nothing more I can give or do for you"? Love is a fire that consumes us, leaves us looking for ways to love and no one can spell out rules and regulations for us. That's what we need the Holy Spirit for, to enable us to experience God's love and then find ways we can best express it to others.

Jesus doesn't want to exhaust us or make us live like groveling slaves trying to get everything right, fearing punishment if we fail. He calls us "friends." Friendship for him isn't sentimental or sloppy. Some friendships can close us up, make us

negative, feed our neurotic behavior. Jesus' friendship is one of mutual love and respect. Friends help expand our world, expose us to new and creative possibilities and sustain us when we are in need. Good friends keep us normal; pull us out of ourselves when we are closed off; lift us out of depression; are our sounding boards when we need to speak about something and friends open new worlds to us.

We are friends of Christ already. He has accomplished that for us – “I call you friends.” With the help of his Spirit, we can act that way and each day resemble him more and more. Or, as he describes for us today, as his friends, we will “bear fruit that will remain.” At this Eucharist we invite Jesus to show us how we can live and reflect our friendship with him. We ask him to show us what must die and what we must lay down so that our lives will blossom with new fruits that reveal his presence in our lives.

In other word we pray, “Jesus, teach us to love one another and help us live that love so people will know that we are your friends.”

## **FAITH BOOK**

*Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. “Faith Book” is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.*

### **From today's Gospel reading:**

I have called you friends,  
because I have I have told you everything I have heard  
from my Father.

It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you  
and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain....”

### **Reflection:**

We are friends of Christ already. He has accomplished that for us – “I call you friends.” With the help of his Spirit, we can act that way and each day resemble him more and more. As his friends, we will “bear fruit that will remain.” We pray today, “Jesus, teach us to love one another and help us live that love so people will

know that we are your friends.”

**So, we ask ourselves:**

- Am I comfortable calling Jesus, “My Friend”?
- What must I change in my life to better reflect to others my friendship with Jesus?

## **JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD**

**“In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him.”**

*(Acts 10:25-26)*

Today’s first reading describes one of the major points of disagreement among the leaders of the early Christian community. The question concerned the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of God’s love and grace. Even today, this issue continues to challenge us as followers of Jesus who said His Father’s sun shines on everyone. We, at Sacred Heart, are blessed to be part of a diverse community. This diversity is a wealth for us, and a challenge as well.

“Many commentators on American culture today have noted the negative role played by fear in our country. As Catholics rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ we know that the role of fear in shaping people’s attitudes and actions is powerful indeed. Scripture scholars tell us that one of the most repeated biblical messages is ‘Be not afraid!’ People often experience newcomers, people who speak foreign languages, look and act differently from one’s own culture, as a threat to our way of life and to our many ‘comfort zones.’ So, the Church continues to preach Jesus’ same message: ‘Be not afraid.’

Should the thoughtful Catholic view the Church’s role in the integration of cultures, as a threat to the integrity of our American ways or as a blessing, a boon, for both our country and for the Church? The bishops have not hesitated to answer the question. This diversity is a blessing even though it does bring challenges and even discomfort and pain.”

*(US Catholic Bishops April 2009 <http://www.usccb.org/scdc/index.shtml>)*

**Did you know?**

§ The US Catholic Bishops’ conference has a sub-committee dedicated to the

mandate of bringing Catholics from various culturally diverse communities into a fuller participation in the faith, life, and evangelizing mission of the Church. This mandate includes the following responsibilities: Pastoral care of Hispanic Catholics, African American Catholics, Native American Catholics, Asian Catholics, African Catholics, Pacific Islander Catholics, Catholic migrants and refugees and people on the move.

**What you can do:**

§ Reach out in friendship to someone who comes to worship with us, but who is from another culture.

§ Join our parish Global Outreach Ministry and support it's programs and activities. (See contact information in this bulletin)

§ ***"Be not afraid."***

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)

**POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES**

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates' names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, *"People of Faith Against the Death Penalty"* If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:

- Davy G. Stephens                      #0388932    (On death row since 12/20/95)
- Russell Tucker                        #0413011    (2/21/96)
- Kenneth Neal                          #0495163    (2/26/96)

----Central Prison    1300 Western Blvd.    Raleigh, N.C.    27606

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you,  
"Blessings on your preaching"  
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