

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes**  
**Santa Barbara, CA**  
The Sixth Sunday of Easter, Cycle B—May 13, 2012

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Reflections on Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48; 1 John 4: 7-10; John 15:9-17

**T**his command I give you: that you love one another. The commandment to love has very deep roots in our Judeo-Christian tradition: Every Jewish child, and every Christian child, learns that *you shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart and soul and strength* and, from another part of the Hebrew scripture, *you shall love your neighbor as yourself*.

But this commandment somehow sounds a little different coming from the mouth of Jesus. Now, I don't want to exaggerate the difference: Christians have a bad habit of contrasting their "God of love" with an Old Testament God who is supposedly poised to punish anyone who breaks his laws. This is simply untrue. In the Jewish tradition that Jesus grew up with, the commandment was not an order to be obeyed – or else – but a rule for living, like the Golden Rule; a set of wise guidelines for how to live one's life to the full. In Psalm 119, for example, the psalmist becomes almost lyrical, talking about how wonderful God's precepts and decrees and ordinances are, because they teach one how best to live. And Jesus shared this very positive understanding of the commandments.

Still, today's reading from John's gospel, as well as the first letter of John, from which the second reading is taken, add something very special to the commandment to love.

For one thing, we have the example of Jesus himself, showing us how to live it out. The gospel passage comes from the words Jesus spoke at the Last Supper, soon after washing his disciples' feet—doing what the disciples considered a demeaning job. Then, as you heard, Jesus says that there is *no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friend*, which is just what he was about to do. This is not just love in thought or word, but love in action.

Another distinctive element is the explicit

statement that love starts with God. Whatever love we have to offer to God comes from God in the first place, because *God is love*, as the letter of John states. To keep the commandment to love God and one another means simply to return to God a love we have first received, and to pass it on to others:

*As my Abba has loved me, so I have loved you. Live on in my love . . . Love one another as I have loved you.* Or, in the letter of John: It is *not that we have loved God, but that God has loved us*.

Returning that love to God, and passing on that love to others, makes us in some degree like God: *Everyone who loves is begotten of God* [or *conceived*, since this is Mother's Day weekend!]. Let me repeat: *Everyone who loves is conceived of God, and has knowledge of God*.

Similarly, Jesus calls us *no longer servants, but friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learned from my Abba*. Jesus erases the boundaries of status between himself and us. Nothing is hidden; everything becomes mutual; everything is passed on. And that changes everything for us, if we let it. If we allow ourselves to *live on in that love*, to give and receive it freely.

*So, let us love one another, because love is of God.* That is easier said than done, right?!

Love in practice, love in action, is harder than love in theory. Sometimes it requires us to cross borders (as the JustFaith program calls it), to go beyond our comfort zone, to erase the boundaries that divide "us" and "them": male and female; slave and free; leper and healthy; citizen and undocumented worker; housed and homeless; sinner and Pharisee; and of course the big one for the early church, Jew and Gentile.

Today's first reading gives us a very good example of the kind of transformation that is required of us. As you probably know, Luke the Evangelist wrote the Book of Acts as a sequel, or Part II, to his gospel. And in this second work he

tells a number of stories about how the disciples stepped out beyond the Jewish world with which they were familiar. One of these is this story about Peter and Cornelius, which he develops at some length. Today, unfortunately, we only heard excerpts from the last part of that story. So let me remind you of what went before.

Cornelius is a Roman centurion living in the Roman garrison town of Caesarea. He is a God-fearing man, despite being a pagan. One day he receives a visit from an angel, who tells him to send for a man named Peter, who is staying with Simon the Tanner in Joppa, about 30 miles south. So Cornelius sends his men down to Joppa, a walk that will take them a day and a half to two days. They are nearing the city around noon on the second day, when Peter, who is getting hungry, goes up on the roof to pray. There he falls into a trance and sees a large cloth being let down from heaven, filled with many kinds of animals, birds, and reptiles – all higgeldy-piggledy, that is, not properly sorted into clean and unclean. A voice from heaven tells him to kill and eat, but Peter refuses, saying he has never let anything unclean pass his lips. But the voice responds: *do not call unclean what God has made clean*. This happens three times, and while Peter is thinking about what it all means, the Spirit tells him to go down to meet some men who are looking for him.

So Peter and some of his coworkers set out on their two-day walk north, in the company of Cornelius's men, which is where today's reading starts.

Peter is on a journey, not only of the feet, but of the heart and mind. He is being transformed; he is on a learning curve. He is learning to look at things—and especially at people—in a new way.

And he does quite well. When he comes to Cornelius's house, he walks right in. This might not seem remarkable to us, but it was breaking a taboo about entering a Gentile home. Perhaps you remember the gospel story about the Roman centurion whose servant was ill. He sent for Jesus, but when Jesus arrived he went out to meet him, saying *I am not worthy that you enter under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed*. The centurion did this because he was

aware of Jewish sensitivities on this matter. But for Peter things have now changed, so he goes right in.

The next thing that happens is that Cornelius falls at his feet and Peter says, “Get up, I am only human, like you!” With the example of Jesus before him, Peter knew better than to accept any kind of special homage. What a wonderful example – perhaps especially for the successors of Peter! (Yes, it would be a great sign for the popes to do away with ring kissing and such.) But the example also applies to all of us.

Then Peter starts to speak, saying, *I begin to see how true it is that God shows no partiality*. Peter knows he is a beginner; he is learning, and he must continue to learn.

He goes on to explain about Jesus (most of this is omitted in today's text, because we already know the story) but, as you heard, his account is interrupted by the Holy Spirit descending on everybody in that mixed company.

The Spirit evidently “blows where and when it will,” not observing our protocols or ideas of proper order. Peter recognizes that these Gentiles have already received the Holy Spirit, even though they haven't yet been baptized, so the disciples had better go ahead and perform that rite of passage so as to welcome these Gentiles into communion with them.

There is a lot in this story, both to affirm and to challenge a community like ours. We have all crossed a border to come here. We have stepped away from a traditional parish or church community. We have come to know in our hearts that the Spirit meets us outside the walls, beyond the boundaries, of what we knew before.

And like Peter and his fellow disciples, we are on a learning curve that will require us to continue to grow into this new, broader reality. We will have to open our eyes and our hearts to things we do not yet know. We will be called to cross borders, to move beyond our comfort zone. It won't always be easy, but we do it in the conviction that if we truly *live on in the love of Jesus, his joy may be ours, and our joy may be complete*.