

6th Sunday of Easter - B

Some of my favorite Scripture passages have to do with things that don't fit into the normal way of doing things. I think I've said this before.

But we have another occasion when that happens with the first reading from this evening.

The dominant narrative about how the Church was born tends to proceed from a certain fixed sequence of events: the apostles preach the Good News, people come to believe, they are baptized, and, at least in some of the stories, the Holy Spirit descends upon them.

It's the stories that don't follow this routine, though, that give us a chance to think about the whole plan of salvation in a different way.

We probably need to review the story up to this point, though. Not included in today's reading is the part that describes Cornelius as a Roman centurion who, as God-fearing person, used to give alms to help the Jewish people.

Cornelius has a vision in which an angel of God tells him his prayers to God have been found worthy and that he should send some men to find Peter and bring him to Ceasarea.

While the men were on their way to Joppa, where Peter was, Peter was praying, fell in to a trance and had a vision in which God declared to him that all foods were "clean," that is, they could be eaten.

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Peter couldn't figure out what that meant until the men came from Cornelius and he was told further that he was to go with them.

Today's story takes up from there.

Peter has come to realize that the "clean" foods in his vision really refers to the people who are meant to receive the Good News—not just Jews, but Gentiles as well.

He starts to share that with Cornelius and his household, when God takes over. He doesn't wait for Peter to finish, he doesn't wait for any baptisms, the Holy Spirit just descends upon all who were listening to Peter so that Peter has to play catch-up.

It seems that the Holy Spirit was showing Peter that he had traveled all that way not to bring Good News to pagans, but to discover that God was active among them in ways Peter never would have guessed. He was called there to learn as much as to teach.

It would take a number of similar revelations before Christ's Jewish disciples would realize that Peter's declaration that "God shows no partiality" meant that God could act through any part of creation, appear under any guise of any gender, speak any language, and permeate every culture.

The reading from 1st John tells us much the same thing as it explains that the purpose of Christ's coming was not to start a church so much as so that we might have life through him. It also insists that anyone who loves is participating in the life of God. That definition is a

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lot broader than the one we often operate from.

The Gospel then presents Jesus reminding us that his one command to us is to love. To that command he adds the promise that, if we love, we will share in his own joy.

Can you imagine how the Church's history would have changed if we had consistently followed that line of thinking?

Instead of sending missionaries to "bring the Gospel to the nations" we would have spent more time looking at the lives of those we encountered for evidence that God was already there, present to them, loving them, calling them to love, too.

And they would have experienced us much less as conquerors bringing the Gospel (but more usually just our culture's take on the Gospel) and much more as fellow travelers on the way to fullness of life with God.

I think we're finally making progress on that last point. When I was living in Washington, I had a lot to do with lay missionaries who were training to go overseas. It was impressed upon them daily that if they thought they were just going to bring something to those poor people there, they'd be better off staying home.

But if they were willing to encounter them as people who already had something to share, the experience had a better chance of being mutually enriching and revelatory of the love of God.

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It all comes back to the one command of Jesus: love one another as I have loved you. If we are willing to acknowledge that the love of God surrounds us, goes ahead of us, doesn't wait for us to get our act together, we will be in a better position to recognize it in the lives of others, whoever they may be.

It's not about us. It's about God, who never gives up on his plan to bring all those he loves to salvation.