

ECHOING GOD'S WORD
in
THE CATHOLIC FAITH COMMUNITY
SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
May 9, 2021

SCRIPTURES:

Acts 10:25-48	God works also among the Gentiles.
1 John 4:7-10	We must love as Jesus has loved.
John 15:9-17	Love one another for perfect joy.
Psalm 98:1-4	God's salvation extends to the Gentiles.

READ THE SCRIPTURES:

Read the Scriptures carefully in your group, beginning with the Gospel. Take a few minutes in silence to hear the Lord speaking to the heart. Remember that the word of God in the Bible is primarily addressed to the Church community. What does God want the community to hear today?

SCRIPTURE BACKGROUND:

John:

Jesus goes beyond the great discourse of the Vine and the Branches. Here, the focus is on the relationship between members of the Christian community. The model Jesus offers is the relationship between the Father and the Son. What a gift it is that God has given us: that we should share in the very love that binds the Father and the Son to one another for all eternity! The pagan gods never expected their followers to imitate their example or their lives. In fact, it would have been scandalous to do so. Jesus clearly expects his followers to imitate him and to become like his Father in heaven. Love is the virtue; God is the model.

The kind of love Jesus proclaims is the kind he has had for us: that he laid down his life for us. If we love one another the way he has loved us, we will be willing to sacrifice what we would prefer so that our brothers and sisters can enjoy the benefits of our gifts. This is no small challenge. The only kind of love that mirrors Christ's love is the love that would sacrifice everything so that the ones we love would have life and happiness. Only if we draw our strength from Jesus can we ever hope to live up to this challenge.

No human person can ever be expected to be self-sacrificing for another unless the power of Jesus' Spirit is in that person. So many of us today are not very strong. We don't have much staying power. Our commitments are short-lived. When the going gets tough, we pull out. We terminate relationships before they have a chance to mature. Where is the strength that comes from the Spirit of Jesus? Surely, our Christian faith calls us to more than what is easy and convenient. The Gospel is not easy and convenient.

Jesus expects that his disciples will be faithful to the commandments of God. There are no shortcuts for those who want to follow Jesus.

Acts:

The Church made a most significant decision very early in its history: the inclusion of the Gentiles in the family of faith. Peter breaks with all previous Jewish laws and customs by accepting a Gentile into the community. Peter goes beyond what Jesus himself had done. (Although Jesus had preached in largely pagan regions, in addition to his preaching in Judea, and had worked miracles for non-Jews - the Syrophenician woman - he had not called any Gentiles to be disciples). The Church expands its field of endeavor to include Gentiles because Jesus had authorized the proclaiming of the message "to the ends of the earth."

Cornelius already had the gift of faith, which means that God had taken the initiative in calling him to God's family. How could the Church not accept what God so obviously wanted? To go beyond the experience of our ancestors, under the guidance of the Spirit, must become our strategy as members of the Church. We cannot be limited by the experiences of the past, even of what we so easily call "tradition."

1 John:

The way we will know that God is present in our midst is that we see the love that the disciples of Jesus have for one another. What a sign that is! Love is the only real evidence that God is present! Only God can be the source of the kind of love of which John speaks: a love that is willing to sacrifice everything for another; willingness to lay down one's life for one's friend. God must be recognized as the true source of unselfish love, wherever it is to be found. Some Christians today think that being tough is the sign of their commitment to Jesus Christ -- being hostile and self-sufficient. There must be another way. Love and tenderness will always be a better sign of God's presence.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What evidence is there among Christians today that Christ is present in the community? Victims of abuse? Pope Francis? Do you see signs of supernatural love being given? Protestant missionaries among the poor in Latin America? Mothers and fathers who still love one another despite hard times? Teenagers who stand up for values and for peace? The youth of our parish?
2. What are some of the ways by which the Christian people might more powerfully express their sacrificial love for one another when they come together to celebrate the Eucharist? Why do they not always reach out to someone whose name had appeared in the divorced reports in the newspaper?
3. Name some of the "saints" of our own times who have shown by their deeds that they would willingly lay down their lives for the love God and of their brothers and sisters? Do you know about some of the missionaries in Latin America who have been killed because they supported the poor against the government and the powerful landowners?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

Make up your mind and do it! Reach out to someone who would not easily be your friend this week. Say a good word. Offer some support and encouragement. There are always people we have known for years and have not communicated with recently.

PRAYER

Brother Lawrence (1611-1691) taught people how to pray by adding a short intercession after each intention for which they prayed: "*LORD, MAKE ME ACCORDING TO YOUR HEART.*" List any number of petitions which you want to address to the Lord. After each, say the prayer of Brother Lawrence.

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

A number of years ago, I was assigned by the bishop to become the pastor of a parish community that was considered to be "upscale," up-to-date liturgically, lay ministry focused, sophisticated and "modern!" (Whatever all that was supposed to mean.) After a couple weekends I began to ask staff persons, "Where are the poor people here?" It had seemed to me that all the weekend Masses were filled with middle class and upper-middle class people; even the children appeared to be literate and artistic! Where were the poor? Was this a Catholic parish? Had the poor become so highly polished that they blended into invisibility? How diverse was the parish, anyway?

The Catholic Church in America has always been proud of its 'catholicity.' God has called many different persons to our assemblies, and for the most part, all have been welcome. We are catholic or universal in our goal and in our membership.

It would be interesting for the average Catholic parish in Maine to measure itself as to its representativeness: Is there a cross-section of the local community in our membership? Or are we exclusive and particular in our make-up?

Some of our parishes have a history of ethnic or language-based membership. Even those are more diverse in membership today.

I once served in a parish that had been language-based in its past, even though it was canonically a territorial parish. When we began appealing to laypersons to take on leadership positions and lay ministry functions in the parish, the vast majority of those who came forward were 'new' people, recent arrivals in the community, linguistically different from the majority of the longtime parishioners. When I asked some of the older members why they did not volunteer, they said, "Those newer parishioners speak English better than we do. They are more educated than we are." The leadership persons in the parish, consequently, did not truly represent the parish as it was in fact.

Over the years, youths have told me that they do not really want to serve on the Parish Council because "the meetings are so boring!" I, myself, have been bored to tears by some of the meetings I have had to attend! Why is the Church so boring? Why are ushers only men? Youths are sometimes asked to be ushers for special occasions, but then, we do not instruct them properly, and they don't know what to do. Are people from "away" welcome in our celebrations? What classes of people do not really count among us? God shows no partiality. Why does the Church?