

**Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48**

**Psalm 98**

**I John 4:7-10**

**John 15:9-17**

**Homilist: Deacon Mike Mocek**

**May 9, 2021**

There is a saying that goes something like this, “Wisdom comes from experience, and many of our experiences are the result of a lack of wisdom.” You may have heard it said a bit differently, as the humorist Will Rogers put it, “Good judgment comes from experience, and a lot of that comes from bad judgement.” I will not speculate about my wisdom or judgment, but I will say that I have had a lot of experience. And my experiences have taught me at least two things about life – it is full of surprises and the most profound truths encountered in life seem to be the simplest truths. Our readings today affirm both of those lessons.

As is the case on all Sundays of Easter, today’s first reading is a narrative taken from the Acts of the Apostles. This narrative from Acts is followed and its message is reinforced by exhortations from the First Letter of John and the Gospel of John. Acts of the Apostles is a sequel to the Gospel of Luke, and some say a better title might be Acts of the Holy Spirit, because it is largely about the Holy Spirit acting through the Apostles and other first-century Christians. A few minutes ago, we heard about the Holy Spirit acting through Peter the Apostle and Cornelius, a Gentile. To better understand this narrative, we need to go back a few verses for context. Chapters 10-15 of Acts tell the story of ethnic and religious tensions among Christians, tensions that could have destroyed the new and growing movement. As more and more Gentiles came to believe in Jesus, his Jewish followers began to feel

threatened. The Church in Jerusalem, led by Peter, saw Jesus as the Jewish Messiah and believed that his followers must first conform to the rules and regulations of Judaism. But Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, disagreed. So, to solve this dilemma, in steps the Holy Spirit. Peter had a dream in which an elaborate banquet of delicious and forbidden food was placed before him, and a voice invited him to eat. But Peter refused the forbidden food, insisting that it would violate his faith. The voice twice repeated the invitation and finally said, “What God has made clean, you are not to call profane.” At about the same time, Cornelius, a devout and generous Roman Centurion, had a vision in which an angel directed him to send for a man named Peter so he might learn what God expected of him. When Cornelius’s invitation reached Peter, the dream about forbidden food was fresh on his mind, and Peter made the connection. So, he accepted the invitation from Cornelius, despite knowing that such an encounter with a Gentile was forbidden by Jewish law. Today’s reading begins with Peter entering the home of Cornelius.

Cornelius greets Peter with great respect, and Peter speaks with great wisdom. “In truth,” he said, “I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him.” While Peter was speaking, another Pentecost-like event happened. The Holy Spirit descended on all who were listening. But this time, the Holy Spirit came down on the Gentiles who were present as well as on the Jews. Seeing that God’s Spirit cannot be bound by human rules, Peter baptized the Gentiles on the spot. He realized that God had chosen the Gentiles, the Gentiles had accepted, and that was all that was needed. Talk about life’s surprises. Can you imagine Peter’s surprise when he

awakened from his dream about eating forbidden food, and even greater surprise when he saw Cornelius and his Gentile household filled with the Holy Spirit? Peter responded to these surprises with great wisdom. He opened his eyes, his mind, and his heart. He accepted the will of God over his cultural and religious traditions and biases.

The lesson that Peter learned in his encounter with Cornelius is one for the ages. And it is a lesson that we sorely need today. His proclamation that "...God shows no partiality..." calls us to open our eyes, our minds, and especially our hearts to those from different cultures, different traditions, and even different religions. It calls us to recognize God in others. It calls our churches to be welcoming and inclusive rather than exclusive. Pope Saint John XXIII heard that call when he convened the Second Vatican Council with *aggiornamento*, an Italian term which meant opening the doors and windows of the church, letting fresh air in, and equally important, allowing the light of the Holy Spirit to stream out. Pope Francis has also heard that call. In a series of meditations on the church, he has said, "May the church be the place of God's mercy and love, where everyone can feel themselves welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live according to the good life of the Gospel. And in order to make others feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged, the church must have open doors so that all might enter. And we must go out of those doors and proclaim the Gospel." I wish more of us would hear that call and respond to it.

The unquestioned enabler of open eyes, minds, and hearts, and of a welcoming church is love. And that takes us to our second reading and to the Gospel. The key

words of today's second reading could not be simpler, nor could they be more profound, "God is love." Other statements that we heard in both readings are like exclamation points to those three key words. "Let us love one another." "Whoever is without love does not know God." "As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love." "Love one another as I love you." "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." We are not talking about puppy love here. We are talking about selfless love, love that engenders a willingness to sacrifice oneself for others and expects nothing in return. Jesus gave us the ultimate example of that love with his sacrifice on the cross. So, how can we love one another today following the example of Jesus? Well, it is not by demeaning others with whom we may disagree, or by turning a blind eye to the suffering of others, or by spewing hatred, which is sometimes done even in the name of the church. Those actions tear down and destroy. Love builds up and unites. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a vision of what he called a Beloved Community, a community grounded in love, reconciliation, dignity, and respect. Dr. King's Beloved Community is no different than the Kingdom of God that Jesus calls us to begin building in this life. We build it by working to end hate and division, by fighting conditions and practices that dishonor others, and by showing selfless love for one another. If we can do that, we will obey Jesus' command to, "love one another as I love you," and we will come to know God by being more like God.