

## 6th Sunday of Easter – Year B

The Talmud, the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and the primary source of Jewish religious law and theology suggests that we should do two things: *acquire a teacher and choose a friend. In Jesus we have both the best teacher and the best friend we could ever hope to have.* A true friend is someone who has seen us at our worst and still loves us. If you have encountered me only on my best days, when all is going well and I am in top form, and you like me, I have no guarantee that you are my friend. But if you have seen me when I am unpleasant, self-absorbed, distracted, and even selfish and still love me, then I can be sure you are my friend. The old gospel Song “*What a friend we have in Jesus*” is not pious sentimentalism, but it is the heart of the matter. In Jesus, we truly do have a friend.

In today’s Gospel from St. John, Jesus emphasizes his desire to be close and intimate with his disciples. Generally, friendships imply mutual concern and interest, an openness to sharing life experiences, honesty, and even equality. Since we are not equal with God, we are more comfortable imagining our relationship with God as with a superior or a good boss rather than a friend. How does this image of friendship and intimacy with Jesus challenge you? How is Jesus your friend?

At the heart of Christianity is a relationship with God through Jesus in the Holy Spirit. It is not primarily a set of commandments and a moral code or a way of life, it is not a charitable lifestyle, nor an intelligent religion to make sense of life nor a philosophical framework to ponder the mysteries of life – ***while it can incorporate all this*** – *Christianity is our friendship and relationship with God* – We can only have a true friendship with God only in the Holy Spirit given to us,

Without the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, Christianity would be very boring, unappealing, unintelligent, and irrelevant. Many of our contemporaries are walking away from faith and reject its claims because they are not under the influence of the Spirit of God, but saturated with the Spirit of this World, the Flesh, and the Devil – the three spiritual enemies of our souls – as St. John put it, For all that is in the world, the lust of the Flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father but of the world.

So if we want to come closer to God and deepen in our friendship, relationship, and intimacy with the living God we need to be open to the gift of the ***Holy Spirit in an intentional and ongoing way***. We are not done after our Baptism and Confirmation, they are only a beginning, a start to a life in the Spirit of God.

The readings for this 6th Sunday of Easter provide us with readings that emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believers and the church.

The **first reading** speaks of St. Peter's interaction with the Roman centurion Cornelius, we find the early Church deepening in a new understanding of its identity and mission. She realizes that it is not simply to be a renewal movement within Judaism but an instrument for the gathering of all nations into one worldwide People of God – the Church. The community of believers, previously a movement within Judaism, has to catch up with the wider outreach of the Holy Spirit. It does in the person of Peter, who is describing in the first reading the deeply moving experiences in connection with Cornelius that have led him, beyond himself and his previous understanding, to grasp the new reality to which the whole Church is being called.

*When Peter was preaching the Gospel, we hear that the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word, and the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles – that is on the not circumcised nor the baptized – did you hear that? Holy Spirit fell on the unbaptized! God cannot be contained even with Sacraments - He does what he wills. Thus Peter says “Can anyone forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”*

The two remaining readings, from the Johannine literature, bring out the centrality of love as the supreme attribute of God. **St. John states it baldly: ‘God is love.’** The Old Testament defined God as being itself – “I am who am” but the New Testament defines the nature of God as love – his way of being is love. The Holy Spirit is understood as the love between the Father and the Son in the Holy Trinity. When believers truly love another, this is a sure sign that they have been drawn into and live within the life of God, which is love.

The same ‘chain’ of love is central to the exhortation we hear in the **Gospel**. What Jesus is essentially trying to communicate is a sense of his own experience of being loved by the Father. *He loves us as he has been loved by the Father to pass on to us the ‘joy’ that he experiences in that divine love.* “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love” –

Now here is a million-dollar question. **Is God’s love conditional or unconditional?** We can find theologians on both sides of the camp. It’s not Either OR but Both And! In one sense his love is unconditional. Firstly, God has given life to all human beings in a gracious manner when no one deserved it, and he continues to shine his Sun on good and evil men and send his rains on terrorists and tourists. Our sin does not diminish his love for us, when we repent he does not love us more, and his love never changes. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us, says St. Paul in Romans.

However, on the other hand, from our human side, to remain in his love, to abide in his love, to experience his love, which is the gift of the Holy Spirit, we need to keep the commandments, in this sense his love is conditional. If we live in sin and break all the commandments and scorn the Holy Spirit we will not experience his love, rather we will experience the consequences of sin, which can be understood as the wrath of God.

So to experience the gift of true Joy and to experience it to the full, Jesus says we need to fulfill the commandments, particularly the commandment to love one another. We can only develop friendship and intimacy with Jesus if we attempt to live out his commandments.

Despite the vast difference between ordinary human beings and Christ as the Son of God, the disciples can think of themselves as his 'friends' rather than servants for two reasons. First, he has made the supreme gesture of friendship by laying down his life for them. Second, he has shared with them the intimacy he enjoys with the Father. They are 'friends' not through their choice of him but because he has chosen them – all part of a vast divine design to communicate God's love to the world, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus told us that the Father would never refuse someone who asked for the Holy Spirit. So ask, and ask again! The one prayer that is always appropriate whether we are experiencing success or failure, whether we are confident or

afraid, whether one is young or old, is “Come Holy Spirit!” To the degree we yield and receive the Spirit of God, we will experience the friendship and intimacy with Jesus and encounter the abiding Love of God for which we are all made for!