

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Acts 10:44-48

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, ⁴⁶ for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" ⁴⁸ So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

Commentary

The immediate context for today's lection is Peter preaching to Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and his household. Cornelius sent for Peter, asking to hear the good news. Simultaneously, Peter had a vision which convinced him that God declared Gentiles no longer unclean; therefore Peter should not view them as such. The larger framework for the lection is the struggle in the Jerusalem church over the nature of their mission. Were they sent only to Israel, or was the gospel intended also for Gentiles? When Peter went to visit the home of the Roman officer, he took with him a group of disciples. Peter could have gone alone, but perhaps he sensed the need for witnesses to see what God had directed him to do. The disciples who accompanied him were amazed in the midst of Peter's preaching. The Holy Spirit was poured out on the Gentiles. Peter's question is interesting: "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" Water and the Holy Spirit have been inextricably linked in the history of baptism in the church. In the Methodist church, baptism is a channel of grace through which the Spirit is received. By the end of the first century, at the latest, water baptism was seen as a necessary condition for being admitted into the church. The two elements begin to come together in Peter's question. Since these Gentiles already have the Spirit, can we deny them water baptism? That is, how can we deny them membership and the rites of the church, if God has already blessed them? In this story, Peter admitted the Gentiles to fellowship and church membership because the Spirit had given a clear sign that he should. That Peter and his friends remained in Caesarea for several days is important. Initiation into the church needs to be followed by intentional nurture on the part of the church. Peter stayed so that these new converts could learn more about the faith.

Reflection

1. How do you understand the Spirit to be present in the sacrament of baptism? Does the Spirit work apart from the sacrament?
2. Can we deny membership in the church to someone whom God has blessed? What other times in the history of the church has that question been important? What does the question mean in the contemporary church?

1 John 5:1-6

¹ Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. ² By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³ For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, ⁴ for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. ⁵ Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? ⁶ This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.

Commentary

The author of First John is making a circular argument – everyone who believes Jesus is the Christ is born of God; we respond to God’s love by loving God’s children; we know we love God’s children when we love God and carry out God’s commands; we know we love God by keeping the commandments; when we keep them we can conquer the world; the one who believes that Jesus is God’s Son conquers the world. He says that we conquer the world through faith (believing in God) and by works (keeping the commandments). Is this a contradiction? Not if you understand that keeping the commandments is an *expression of faith*. If we love God we will naturally keep the commandments, which mandate us to love God’s children in response to God’s love for us. That love is understood in the concrete doing of deeds for those in need. For First John, there is a direct connection between faith and good works. The key to keeping the commandments is being united with God in love. When we love God, the commandments are easy – a joy, not a burden. Belief in Jesus is not a matter of intellectual assent but the focus of our lives. If we believe in Jesus, we have a model and a source of power for living in love. We have a model because we see how Jesus lived and cared for us. He is our source of power because he is the Christ.

Reflection

The way to love is by caring for others. What are the latest statistics for our community on persons living in poverty, without enough to eat, without basic medical care or a decent place to live? In what ways are we called to love these children of God? How is our love for God demonstrated by our ministry to persons in need?

John 15:9-17

⁹ As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹² "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶ You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Commentary

This passage falls in the middle of Jesus' Farewell Discourse, his final extended occasion for teaching his disciples and preparing them for what is coming. It began with the familiar foot washing scene depicted in chapter 13 and will end with his arrest, trial and crucifixion. In chapter 14, Jesus promised not to leave his disciples orphaned. Here, he bridges the distance between himself, soon to be glorified in God's presence, and the church on earth. The key word in verses 9-10 is "abide," which characterizes a relationship of trust, knowledge, and unity that exists between Christ and God. While on earth Christ was able to remain or abide in God from whom he came. In the same way, the disciples will be able to abide in Christ even after he has returned to God. The love of Christ is the arena, the sphere, the location of Christian living. To be understood here, "love" (agape) has to overcome the many popular overuses and misuses of the word. The word does not primarily represent a feeling, nor is it a synonym for "like." To love is to be *for* another and to act *for* another, even at cost to oneself. The supreme act of love is the giving of one's life for the other (v. 13). The primary canon by which love for one another is measured is God's love for the world and Christ's love, which carried out in full and final obedience that love of God. To live in the world and yet within the constancy of this love is to know the joy of which Christ speaks. This joy has its source in God, whose presence is sometimes described as joy. Given the hostility of the world, this word of assurance enables the church not simply to survive but to flourish in fullness of life. And what about friends? Do friends obey, as indicated in verse 14? Isn't it servants who obey? In what sense then are disciples no longer servants? Certainly not in the sense that they have graduated from doing for others what love dictates. There is no upward mobility in the kingdom; otherwise, the foot washing by Jesus and the frequent reminder that a servant is not greater than the master would be meaningless. Followers of Jesus are friends of Jesus in that they know what he is doing. Jesus has made God known to them. From this context, Jesus' followers make their prayers, asking what they will because what they will is bathed in the knowledge and love of God. But let the church beware: wherever a strong sense of community prevails, elitism and exclusivism can creep in and make outsiders of everyone else. Notice how all the significant terms – love, abiding, obedience, friendship and joy – are set within an order of continuity. The

sequence – from God, through Christ, to the church – is clear and vital. In case anyone missed the point, Jesus consolidates it in a statement that both assures and warns the church: “You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you” (v. 16).

Reflection

1. What does the passage say about the source of love? How are we able to love at all? What does it mean for us to lay down our lives for our friends? Is it easier to die than to live a life of service to others?
2. When Jesus says that living in his love means our prayers will be answered, is this a *quid pro quo*? How do we explain it when prayers of persons living in Christ’s love are not answered as they would want?

Responsive Psalter

From Psalm 98

- ¹ O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory.
- ² **The LORD has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.**
- ³ He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.
- ⁴ **Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.**
- ⁵ Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody.
- ⁶ **With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD.**
- ⁷ Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it.
- ⁸ **Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy**
- ⁹ at the presence of the LORD, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.