

Weekly Reading – Monday, May 11, 2009

We turn now to the lessons for May 17, 2009 or the Sixth Sunday of Easter. The great 50 days of Easter are moving toward their end and climax at Pentecost, two weeks away now on May 31. Given that, the underlying questions have to do with the relationship between Christ and believers, what it means, how it is evidenced, what sustains it? What does being "connected" mean? The Acts story might be headed, "New Connections."

Acts 10: 44 - 48

This is the final scene of the long and pivotal encounter of Peter with the household of the Gentile and centurion, Cornelius. Following Peter's dream of clean and unclean foods, the apostle is led to the home of Cornelius. Crossing the threshold, Peter enters a new world and the Christian movement is forever changed. Immediately prior to today's text Peter preaches a sermon that summarizes the credo (Acts 10: 34 - 43). Now the Holy Spirit comes to Peter's listening congregation, the household of Cornelius. Luke tells us that "the circumcised believers who accompanied Peter were astounded" by this turn of events. Interesting that it is the "believers" who are astounded, not the Gentile newcomers! Next, Peter asks, rhetorically, "can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people?" They are then baptized and the church of "neither Jew nor Gentile" is born. As often happens in Acts, the Spirit leads the way, taking the apostles where they had not expected or planned to go. Still, the Spirit is kept in close company with Word, coming after Peter's proclamation and with Sacrament, which it precedes. The most prominent note, however, is that of astonishment. And it is the believers and circumcised who are most astounded of all. The final line, "Then they invited him to stay for several days," may seem a mere literary conclusion, but it is more. So often in Acts, hospitality is a sign of the Spirit's power and presence. This looks back to the hospitality/ community of the early chapters in Jerusalem and forward to similar accounts as of Lydia in Philippi in Acts 16.

I John 5: 1 - 6

There's a good deal of overlap between this epistle selection and the gospel lesson from John. Central to both is the conjunction of "love" and "commandments." So, here in I John 5: 2, "By this we know that we the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments." Love is not simply a feeling, it is behaviors. It is not just "filling up." It is "following through." In this emphasis the epistle continues the theme of spirituality made real in actual life and relationships as opposed to a spirituality that floats free from actual relationships and community or is mainly about my personal self-enhancement. I John cannot be accused of setting the sites too low: "whatever is born of God conquers the world." This faith and life in Christ "conquers the world." Again, in the Johannine perspective, "world" is the fallen world, the world which does not know or receive Christ. This world is conquered by faith, love and obedience.

John 15: 9 - 17

As noted above, the focus during the Great Fifty Days of Eastertide gradually shifts from the resurrection itself to the relationship between Christ, soon to ascend to God, and believers who remain in the world. Thus the governing image of this section, the vine and branches, and the key word "abide." And the thoroughgoing relational emphasis, so clear in verse 9, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love." How are we to abide in Christ's love? By keeping his commandments? And what are his commandments? They seem to come down to one central commandment, verse 12, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." The intense relational emphasis here is in some tension with Paul's teaching, that Christ lays down his life for sinners and for the ungodly (Romans 3 - 5). Laying down one's life for one's friends sounds different, as if sacrifice is merited by friendship. Perhaps to counteract this tendency verse 16 tacks the other direction and reads, "You did not choose me but I chose you." Christ's call and choosing of them was not prompted by their merits or friendship, but by grace. The bottom line, however, is "love one another." As part of the extended "Farewell Discourse" of John (chapters 13 - 17) the idea seems to be "stick together." This idea of staying connected has a huge resonance in our world of twitter, texting, email and constant contact. Staying connected is huge for the internet generation, which of course has lots of new and powerful ways to stay connected. What is the quality and nature of the connections we have with one another today, through this technology? Preachers have a lot to ponder in the Johannine emphasis on staying connected and the parallel emphasis of contemporary culture.