

Year B, 2018
Fr. Robert D. Arnold

Sixth Sunday of Easter
Acts 10:44-48; 1 John 5:1-6; St. John 15:9-17

✠ In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

The Community of St. John produced only about 10% of the New Testament, but that 10% contains over 30% of the New Testament's references to love. We may have just discovered this Gospel's theme! It doesn't require a Masters degree in Communications to understand the KISS principle. Preachers would do well to have that sign nailed to the wall over their desks. When explaining something, no more assumptions or explanations should be made than is absolutely necessary. "Keep It Simple..." Simplicity makes for good communication. I think John was following that principle since he repeats the same words over and over. You could call the summary of his Gospel: Love Jesus; love God; love each other; and the Holy Spirit will teach you everything you need to know.

It's sounds like a plan to me. Notice how often the letters of John emphasize the need to love God and to demonstrate that love by loving each other. That sounds like such good advice. But the reason these letters were written was because, while the various house churches that were part of the Community of John may still have loved God, they were pretty much at odds with each other over matters of doctrine. There had been a lot of love lost between them. Apparently, the Holy Spirit was teaching different things to different people. The letters were written to point out the need for an official teaching ministry. They still needed to love God and each other and to be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit but, contrary to current popular opinion, they were not to be their own individual interpreters of the teaching of the Holy Spirit. Not every spirit, after all, is holy. And, despite what these individuals may have thought, not everyone is equal to the original apostles.

In our lesson from The Acts of the Apostles we see some of the stress fulfilling Jesus' command put the apostles under. The conversion of Cornelius and other gentiles was against everything Peter had been taught and believed about holiness requiring separateness. God's people needed to build a small circle to keep the "other" out, he once thought. Peter discovered that Cornelius' conversion, or anyone else's, doesn't depend on the skill of the witness, the eloquence of the rhetoric, the persuasiveness of

the argument, the inspiring performance of a charismatic preacher or the expertise of the scholar. The Holy Spirit didn't even wait for Peter to finish his sermon before disrupting the service with the spiritual gift of ineffable praise and religious ecstasy. Conversion happens when our tiny, little soul is touched by the mighty Spirit of God. There was nothing Peter did or said that got this ball rolling; it was from the Holy Spirit. And there was nothing Peter could do to stop it! That had to be tough for Peter, especially when it went against everything he knew about being religious. The Holy Spirit convinced Peter that the love of God is not demonstrated in keeping the circle closed but in letting the circle expand. And that requires our arms to open wider and wider to embrace more and more, and include people that can be very different from ourselves. That's hard to do. It creates a lot of discomfort to open the doors of a club and become a church. It's difficult to generate a lot of enthusiasm for that in our modern, entirely gentile congregations, so you can imagine what crossing that divide between Jew and Gentile was for the early Christians.

I think this is what has always bothered me a bit by this Gospel reading. Jesus seem to be offering unconditional love and yet He keeps making it conditional on our keeping His commandments. The commandment that calls for our obedience is that we love one another—that is to say, we work for the good of the other; work to build up the larger body, the Church. Apparently when you love you realize that it's not longer just about you.

“There was a farmer who had a lot of fields. He kept all the birds and creatures away from his crops with traps and fences. He was very successful.

“But he was very lonely. So, one day he stood in the middle of his field to welcome the animals. He stayed there from dawn to dusk with his arms outstretched calling to them. But not a single animal came; not a single creature appeared. They were terrified of the farmer's new scarecrow.

“Just let down your arms and we'll all come to you.¹

“You are my friends,” Jesus said, “if you do what I command you.” And then He reminds us that the greatest love is laying down your life for

¹ From the movie, *The Doctor*, starring John Hurt.

your friends. Clearly the reference here is to His crucifixion; but could it be that laying down your life means for us getting our egos out of the way?! God's love overcomes the divisions that the ego promotes and maintains and the world exploits.

St. Paul's ministry was primarily to the gentiles, but it is the Apostle Peter who give the ministry legitimacy—the apostolic imprimatur, as it were. In the lesson from The Acts we see what can happen when Peter gets his ego out of the way. The Holy Spirit convinced Peter that the love of God is always building bigger circles to take the “other” in.

I suppose it means setting a bit of our egos aside; but it is always worth it for the greater love and glory of God. Amen.