

**SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, YEAR B, RCL**

**ACTS 10:44-48, PSALM 98, 1 JOHN 5:1-6, JOHN 15:9-17**

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**MAY 10, 2015**

Are women human beings? The anonymous tract *Disputatio nova contra mulieres, qua probatur eas hominess non esse* (A new argument against women, in which it is demonstrated that they are not human beings), first published in 1595, rapidly grew notorious, and was reprinted many times during the 17th and 18th centuries. By selectively quoting scriptural passages, along with a few references to other works, the author attempted to prove that women have no souls, and, being little better than higher animals, will have no afterlife. Although a degree of anti-feminine spite is evident, he was less intent to denigrate women than to advance an absurd argument parallel to what he took to be the equally absurd theological propositions of the Socinian sect – they did not believe in the Trinity and also that Christ was not divine. It was nevertheless inevitable that most readers of the time would take the tract at face value. Many refutations appeared and they had an impact on early modern feminist thought.<sup>1</sup>

Now that sort of argument astounds us today, doesn't it? But if you look at history, how often have we human beings tried to exclude other humans? Whether it be by gender, by race, by nationality...we tend to think of things in terms of who is in and who is out...And yet, God measures by and moves in other ways...surprising ways...astounding ways...

Look at how the Holy Spirit moved in our story of Acts today. People believe that they know what is best, that they know what God wants. The Jewish Christians that were with Peter as he was preaching to the Gentiles could not believe that the Holy Spirit would not just come to, but be *poured out* on the Gentiles, too. After being witness to that, Peter's question of "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" seems like a moot point.

Our community includes all sorts of people...even people we are astounded that God includes. People that we perhaps cannot bring ourselves to like even a little bit, and yet we are called to live in community with them. How are we to do this then?

In our Gospel today, Jesus calls us to abide in his love. The word 'abide' is not a word we hear often today or use regularly. But it is a great word. According to the dictionary it means "To remain, continue, stay; to continue in a particular condition, attitude, or relationship." Being in relationship is what God is all about...is what Jesus is all about. Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love." We are to continue to be in loving relationship with Jesus, so that we will know God's love for us and, in turn, have love to give others.

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<sup>1</sup> Mellen Press. (<http://www.mellenpress.com/mellenpress.cfm?bookid=5707&pc=9>) Accessed May 8, 2015.

But what does it mean to abide in God's love? How do we do it? What does that feel like? Jesus says that "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." He tells us this so that our joy may be complete. The commandments to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves are not to make us feel controlled or to hurt us, but instead are for our own good—so that our joy will be complete. It is when we open ourselves to God's will that we are able to bear the richest fruits of abiding in God's love.

What does this fruit look like if we abide...if we live within Jesus' love? Jesus tells us that He has appointed us to go and bear fruit...fruit that will last...how does a community bear fruit that is lasting? How do we make God's love known to others? As I thought about these questions, they reminded me of a story I had heard about Henri Nouwen.

Henri Nouwen was a Roman Catholic priest who had a prestigious teaching career—teaching at schools such as Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard. He left Harvard to share his life with the mentally handicapped people in the L'Arche community of Daybreak in Toronto, Canada. Soon after he arrived at Daybreak, he was asked to help one of the mentally handicapped members, a man named Adam, with his morning routine. Henri had to wake Adam up, bathe him, shave him, dress him, comb his hair, and position him in his wheelchair, before making and having breakfast. After breakfast, he had to brush Adam's teeth, put on his coat, gloves, scarf, and boots, and push him to his day program in another building. In response to this, Henri writes: "I was aghast! I simply didn't think I could do this...Why should I, the least capable of all the people in the house, be asked to take care of Adam and not of someone whose needs are a bit less? The answer was always the same: 'So you can get to know Adam...'" As time went on, Henri did indeed get to know Adam. Henri allowed himself to be open to God's will...abiding in God's love by living out the commandment that Jesus commissioned us to do...love one another as I have loved you. The fruits of this love were apparent to other members of the community and to outsiders looking in.

Later, Henri wrote that Adam taught him three essential principles about becoming more fully human and I think they are key in understanding how we abide in God's love while living in community. He wrote: "'being' is more important than 'doing'; God's love is more important than the praise of people; and being together is better than being alone." The mark of a faithful community is how it loves, not who its members are. When we act in response to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on us, we desire to do works of love...in fact, this is the tangible sign of discipleship...of following Jesus. It is through our community that we become more fully human and it is also through community that we deeply engage with God's love...and most of all it is through this love that God continues to astound us.

**AMEN.**