

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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Sixth Sunday of Easter

I got a phone call this week from an old friend who is in the process of planning a surprise party for his wife next year. It's hard to believe but I presided over their wedding now 24 years ago, and he wants to have a grand celebration for the silver anniversary soon to come. It should be a lot of fun, and the element of surprise will only make it better. It got me to thinking about some of the great memorable surprise parties I've been a part of, both as the surprise-ee and as one of the surprise-ors. Just a year ago, on the occasion of my own ordination anniversary, my sisters invited me to join them for a walk around Lake Calhoun in Minneapolis and for ice cream on a lovely spring evening. When I got there I discovered my oldest, closet friend from Montana sitting there with them. We had just talked on the phone that morning and he'd said nothing about it. I just assumed that he was 2,000 miles away.

I had pulled the same trick on my father on the occasion of his retirement party many years before. I called to offer my love and congratulations. He thought I was at school in Boston, but he would soon discover that I was at his in-laws' house, five minutes away, having flown in for the evening. He never thought to ask where I was—why would he? In both of those cases some of the people involved in the surprise party knew what was really going to happen, while at least one of them did not. That's why it's so much fun. Today in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles we hear the story of maybe the strangest surprise party that ever came off—strangest because *NOBODY* knew what they were doing there or what was supposed to happen next. So I'm guessing it wasn't so much fun—at least for a while. In fact Peter the Apostle admits that it not only didn't look like fun was likely to happen, in fact it looked more like trouble or tension was going to erupt. To fully appreciate how oddly this surprise party took shape, we have to know some of the details of the setup—details that the heavily edited version of today's Sacred Scripture have left out of the proclamation here. The venue for the party was the house of Cornelius, and the presumed guest of honor was Peter himself. These two men had never met nor ever even heard of each other, and for a good reason: Peter was a Jewish follower of Jesus from Galilee, while Cornelius was a Roman soldier, an Italian pagan guy who lived in Caesarea. They were both devout men of faith who prayed regularly to God, but they would not have recognized the other man's God as theirs. In fact it was their God who appeared to both of them in separate visions while praying, and had directed both of them to meet there at the gathering. Both had brought along their friends and family with them, but nobody knew why. They only knew that Peter was to be welcomed into Cornelius' house, even though Peter's first words upon arrival were to remind every one of the guests (as well as the host) that Jews and Gentiles don't mix. We didn't hear that speech just in the reading—but we should have. Everyone was ready for a lousy time. Peter said, "I don't know what I'm doing here, so why don't you tell me—anybody?" The problem was that nobody else knew either. Hence the strangest surprise party ever.

But what they also didn't know was that they had a mutual friend who had arranged to get them all together in that room. And just as Peter was starting to introduce himself and his religious beliefs, that surprise guest leaped out and shouted "Surprise!!" Actually that mystery guest, the Holy Spirit, didn't leap out, according to Sacred Scripture. Instead he fell down, upon all of them at once. And they were astonished, and overjoyed that the party planner had pulled it off perfectly. He was shouting "Surprise!" in all kinds of different tongues.

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After every good surprise party the question is always, “Did the surprise work?” Yup, it worked all right. Beyond anybody’s wildest dreams. Thanks to this mutual friend of theirs, the Holy Spirit. And as things progressed it came time for the sharing of gifts, and the gift that Peter had to offer was the gift of baptism: “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit even as we have?” he asked. And so it happened.

This was truly amazing. To a whole community of guests who had thought that they had the power to control God, the tables were completely turned. The mutual friend was the surprise host all along. No longer was the sequence of events one of “let’s baptize them first and then perhaps the Holy Spirit will arrive.” Instead it is now, “The Holy Spirit is obviously already among them, so let’s celebrate and acknowledge that with baptism.”

We don’t manipulate God in here at church, just as those surprise party guests at Cornelius’ house didn’t either. *God* invites *us* to the celebration, not the other way around. And even more importantly, *God* invites *us* to the sacraments, beginning with the sacrament of baptism, not the other way around. *We’re* the guests here, not the hosts. The Holy Spirit does not wait outside for us to pour the water. The Holy Spirit is already all over the place among us, and that’s *why* we pour the water. And the Holy Spirit does not wait for *us* to pass judgement on who will be given access to God through our rituals. The access is already there, ready to be acknowledged in our rituals. And if all of that grace and love and access seems almost uncomfortable to us because it is so indiscriminately and lavishly spread around—even among our enemies and those of faiths other than our own, then you can begin to see why those first disciples and Peter were so astonished and confused.

But they are not made anxious or alarmed. They were made joyful and grateful and dedicated. And each time we pour the waters of baptism here, we are invited to join in the same party, hosted by the same amazing mutual friend, who delights in surprises, and we are given the responsibility to make the same response in the way that we live.