

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Scripture Readings

First Reading: Acts 9:26-31

When Saul arrived in Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. Then Barnabas took charge of him and brought him to the apostles, and he reported to them how he had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. He moved about freely with them in Jerusalem, and spoke out boldly in the name of the Lord. He also spoke and debated with the Hellenists, but they tried to kill him. And when the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him on his way to Tarsus. The church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria was at peace. It was being built up and walked in fear of the Lord, and with the consolation of the Holy Spirit it grew in numbers.

Second Reading: 1 John 3:18-24

Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth. Now this is how we shall know that we belong to the truth and reassure our hearts before him in whatever our hearts condemn, for God is greater than our hearts and knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence in God and receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And his commandment is this: we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us. Those who keep his commandments remain in him, and he in them, and the way we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit he gave us.

Gospel: John 15:1-8

Jesus said to his disciples: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and every one that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit. You are already pruned because of the word that I spoke to you. Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither; people will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

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Psalm 22

All: I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.

Side 1: I will fulfill my vows before those who fear the Lord. The lowly shall eat their fill; they who seek the Lord shall praise him: "May your hearts live forever!"

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; all the families of the nations shall bow down before him.

To him alone shall bow down all who sleep in the earth; before him shall bend all who go down into the dust.

And to him my soul shall live; my descendants shall serve him. Let the coming generation be told of the Lord that they may proclaim to a people yet to be born the justice he has shown.

I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.

Almighty ever-living God, constantly accomplish the Paschal Mystery within us, that those you were pleased to make new in Holy Baptism may, under your protective care, bear much fruit and come to the joys of life eternal. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Breaking Open the Word

We believe that the Word of God is living and effective. That means when we read or listen to Scripture, it is Jesus who speaks to us now, in the present moment of our lives. His Living Word gives us hope, purpose and direction in our lives. As we break open these readings for this Sunday, reflect on these questions:

What is Jesus saying to me personally that will give purpose and encouragement to me now?

Am I open to the way Jesus' words are living and effective in the people and world around me?

How will I respond to his message contained in these living words today?

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What Does It All Mean?

First Reading: Acts 9:26-31

Saul wishes to join the disciples in Jerusalem, but they fear him. After all, he has presided over the stoning of Stephen and harassed followers of Christ at every opportunity. But the trusted Barnabas commends him and testifies for Saul. The disciples take Saul in, and before long he runs afoul of some Greek-speaking Jews, who try to kill him. To save his life the disciples sneak him out to Tarsus. The church's most important theologian thus begins his career running for his life. This narrative adds extra drama to the story of Saul's encounter with Christ (Acts 9:1-19ff). He who once persecuted Christians has now become just like them. Yet amid all the turmoil described here, Luke reminds us that the church is at peace, making steady progress and increasingly consoled by the Holy Spirit. In light of Saul's predicament, we can only assume that the church is at peace internally, while facing mortal danger from outside. We should bear some things in mind. First, like the same author's companion book, the Gospel of Luke, the Acts of the Apostles was written some fifty years after the events it narrates. The words "church," "Christians," "apostles," and "Jews" had come to connote precise distinctions by 85 C.E., when Luke wrote, but at the time of the events, these terms were meaningless; the first "Christians" were Jews who professed belief in Jesus Christ. The "church" mentioned in the early chapters of Acts consisted of groups of disciples, and their disciples, united by their belief in Jesus. The name "Christian" was originally an insult which meant literally "followers of the oily one" (Messiah="the anointed"=Christos). In light of these things, Saul's change of heart looks less like a conversion and more like an embrace of a dynamic new movement within his professed religion. In his understanding, as in those of all leaders later called apostles (literally "ones who are sent"), mortal danger comes with the job. It is the path that Jesus has taken.

Second Reading: 1 John 3:18-24

Addressing the audience as "little children," the author expounds on this letter's central theme. We must love, as we have been loved, in action that matters, and not just in talk. The quality of our love is a measure of our commitment to the truth and the strength of our belief. All other considerations are secondary: We must believe in Jesus and love one another as he has commanded us.

Gospel: John 15:1-8

Jesus describes relationships among himself, the Father, and the disciples, with a most familiar image. Jesus is the true vine, and the Father is the vinegrower. We are the branches. Apart from him we can do nothing. If we "live in him" we produce abundantly, but if we do not "live in him" we wither, and we risk being thrown into the fire. If we live in him

we may ask for anything. We have glorified the Father by bearing fruit, by becoming Jesus' disciples. Like every other reference to vines in the four gospels, this must be understood in its Jewish context, in which the vine is Israel. God is the vinegrower. But with these inflammatory words, John insists that Jesus has replaced Israel. Keeping in mind that we must overcome the severe anti-Jewish character of much of John's gospel, we can also savor the power of this imagery. A grapevine can grow wild to occupy great chunks of real estate. It is more useful when its branches submit to the discipline of the vinedresser. They can produce grapes but also leaves for nourishment, shade, and shelter, and fuel for warmth. Christ is the vine who has subjected himself to the Father's discipline, and we are branches.

Nothing Greater

It's easy to say, "I love you." Consider that phrase for a moment. It communicates a great deal in just three words. The implication is that merely saying the words "I love you" is quite simple. We can say it to a family member, a friend, a dog,...a piece of pizza (though, hopefully not). The phrase is really easy to say, but in our actions that the words come to life and are proven true, or untrue. Actions follow beliefs. In this first reading from Acts, we hear about Saul's difficulty in getting the apostles to trust him and his post-conversion intentions. It was only after Saul (later, Paul) proved with his actions—through bold preaching and trustworthiness—that they believed his intentions to be sincere. St. John makes a similar point in the second reading. It's not enough to love merely in "word and speech" but "in deed and truth." God sees whether we truly love one another in our actions. This really is the heart of the metaphor Christ gives us in the Gospel, demonstrating that he is the vine and if we are connected to him we will bear fruit. Those who only claim to be connected will not bear fruit and will be exposed over time. It's as though Jesus is saying, "Thank you for proclaiming you love me. Now let's see that love put into action."

Heavenly Father, you call me into a life abundant with authentic love; a love that is more than just words. Help me to make this love known within my actions. Bless the love I give with fruitfulness, so that others may be drawn closer to Love himself. I ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.