

May 9, 2021
Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts of the Apostles 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48
Psalm 98:1, 2-3, 3-4
1 John 4:7-10
John 15:9-17

To begin our homily this morning I would like to ask what you might think if your neighbor, a man or woman that you really liked and respected, came over to your house one day and said, "I was wondering if we could be friends?"

And you said, "Well sure, of course we can be friends, after all we are neighbors, and I really appreciate the relationship that we have. Then your neighbor says, great I was hoping you would say that, but, oh - there is one stipulation, and you say - what's that, and he or she says - to be my friend - you have to do whatever I command you to do.

I only know of two people who actually asked anyone that question. The first person is Jesus and the second person is Marcia. Marcia told me the story that when she was a little girl at home, she asked her foster sister Mary Jane "do you love me?" And Mary Jane said of course I love you Marcia, so Marcia just blurted out - then keep my commandments.

To this day Mary Jane still remembers that incident, and what is interesting, I think Mary Jane would do just about anything for Marcia and visa versa. So be careful what you say, because it is true, kids remember what they hear in church and elsewhere.

Fun aside, Jesus did say to His disciples: "This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to

lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command."

There it is, "You are my friends if you do what I command." In other words, in order to be considered His friend; in order to really and truly be His friend you must do what He commands you to do.

Hence I think this statement is one of the reasons why so many people have a problem with Jesus and not so much with God. Jesus calls His followers into a personal accountability and relationship.

Such are the challenges associated with abiding in the Vine Christ Jesus. I remember attending a church that often sang, "I am a friend of God" but the interesting thing is no one ever asked the question, did you keep His commandments this week? Hence one of the reasons our liturgy starts out with a penitential rite. The facts remain we all fall short of keeping His commandments and subsequently we need our feet [or consciences] cleaned.

Hence the Gospel reading this morning picks up where last weeks' gospel reading ended. As you may recall, Jesus said, "I am the true vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains [or abides] 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."

In the second reading today, St. John warns the reader, "whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love." Indeed, keeping God's commands, loving people, and laying one's life down for one's friends may be some of the most difficult tasks we will encounter as His disciples.

I don't know about you, but sometimes I find myself having a hard time loving the behavior of some of the people I meet during a given week. But wait a minute – Jesus never said we had to love their behavior – just love them because He loves them and they too are made in His image. It's the right thing to do.

Author and biblical scholar, Dr. Gerald Borchert once wrote,

The primary task of the disciple is to glorify Jesus, who glorifies the Father. This bearing of fruit, therefore, not only indicates that the followers are true disciples of Jesus but also that God is glorified in their discipleship. . . . Bearing fruit therefore means loving others as God loves them and giving witness to the world. Such fruit bearing is possible only by abiding or remaining in Jesus the vine.

So then picking up where we left off last week, the Lord Jesus admonishes us that if we keep His commandments; then we will remain in His love. Thus He said, "This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you."

For example, and illustrating the point of loving others - when we read the story of St. Peter's encounter with Cornelius, we notice that Peter takes no offence in ministering to a Gentile family. Jews by tradition had very little to do with Gentiles, especially Roman Centurions of the Italian Guard. In comparison with today, the equivalent might be for someone to purposefully associate with a person or family who was engaging in a totally unchurched life, or one living contrary to God's commands. [Some of us already know who that person or family is, the Holy Spirit has already put them on our radar or hearts]

On the other hand - neither did Peter take any credit for what God was doing in the spiritual life of Cornelius and his family. At one point, when Cornelius thought St Peter to be a god and even tried to pay him special homage by bowing down, the blessed Apostle straightaway warned him; “no, I am but a man like you.”

Peter recognized that it was the Holy Spirit who brought about the conversion of this man and his household. Notice what St. Peter said, “In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation [and here we might add, denomination or religious group] whoever *fears Him* and *acts uprightly* [emphasis mine] is acceptable to Him.”

Again, we see no mention concerning St Peter or the disciples bragging about how many souls were saved or look what we are doing or have done. All they said was, and I am paraphrasing here, “Wow, look *what God has done* for the Gentiles. The Holy Spirit has descended on them as on us Jews. Let us baptize them in the name of Jesus Christ.”

St. Peter’s encounter with the Gentile Cornelius and his family represents for the Church a key historical and doctrinal paradigm shift away from Judaism and circumcision as the major distinguishing mark of God’s love. Thus as Christians, our new life in the Kingdom of Heaven begins with our baptism into Christ, and subsequently it is to our baptismal covenant that we must return to over and over again to understand what it means to abide in Christ, and thereafter be able to abide in the Vine.

Here we may need to reemphasize a very important truth, and that is - God loves you and me (all of us) unconditionally. Unfortunately sometimes we can get side- tracked into thinking that we can earn

God's love; for example, if I do good enough, or if I keep the commandments well enough, or if I faithfully serve people hard enough, - then God will love me.

It's true; we are all capable of missing the mark here from time to time. How we act and what we do are important to God, but our good works need to be examined in their proper context. Good works performed in order to get something from God are normally considered as dead works. Good works that originate from abiding in the vine and keeping His commandments will always be classified as right and just. Ultimately it will be God who alone is able to judge the difference.

Fortunately, God in His wisdom foreknew that without help we would all struggle to keep His commands; therefore, He ordained that we be in relationship with others. To that point an unknown author once wrote,

In a culture that values autonomy and self-reliance, we sometimes imagine that we can call only on our own personal strength to shoulder the burdens of those we care for and to face our own difficulties. The Gospel reminds us again and again that God's love is our true source of strength. On Him the strongest person can lean without apology. The proof lies in the empty cross [and tomb].

Jesus said, "By this is how my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love (John 15:8-10).

Noteworthy in this passage is the fact that Jesus loves us the very same way that the Father loves Him. Thus because the root and the vine are so intricately connected, and because the vine and the branches are also connected - the only good fruit that will be produced is what the root dictates, and that root being the love of the Father.

Indeed, it is a reassuring joy to know that all we have to do is stay connected to Him, and the good fruit or the good works we do will naturally precede forth as a result of that abiding.

One final comment and then we will conclude. Needless to say, all living organisms need food to survive, and this reality remains true for all healthy vine branches, leaves, and fruit.

Therefore, if Jesus is the vine and we are the branches then it makes perfect sense that the only nutrient possibly available to feed the branches would be the very food of the vine itself. In other words, logically what flows through the veins of the vine would of necessity be the very sustenance that would feed the branches. I am not a plant scientist or a (veen dahron) but it makes sense to me; hence, the very reason Jesus gave us the Blessed Sacrament the night before He suffered and died.

Jesus emphatically taught the people,

Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. (We may have to stop and think about this statement for a moment to get the full effect of what Jesus was implying.)

Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you.

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me (John 6:53-56). , Here we need to compare the 6th chapter of John with the 15th chapter of John.

Now I know this passage of Scripture is not an easy passage to comprehend or understand, but Jesus did say it with a full force of annunciation of each word, and we do know that after He said it many of His followers followed Him no more.

St. Paul further explaining the mystery of the eating or partaking of Jesus' Body and Blood wrote that because of an improper celebration of the Eucharist - some folks had become sick and some had even died (see 1 Corinthians 10). Thus even though many would deny it, the Eucharist is and has been the center point of Christian worship throughout the history of the Church.

You may remember that we have mentioned an Early Church father named Ignatius of Antioch. Ignatius was a disciple of St John, the disciple who wrote the Gospel of John, and Ignatius also was a bishop and martyr who died in AD 117. It was Ignatius who once said of the Eucharist, "It is 'the flesh of Christ,' 'the gift of God,' and 'the medicine of immortality.'"

Why is this doctrine so important? To bear good fruit, the fruit must receive food from the vine and its roots. Therefore, it stands to faith and reason that without receiving the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ Who is the Vine, we cannot fully remain in the vine and bear the kind of fruit that healthy vines are capable of bearing.

Jesus Christ is the food we need to love God and love neighbor, keep His commandments, and remain connected to the Vine Christ Jesus. And because being connected to Jesus is so very important is the reason that in a few moments we will be celebrating with Jordan and Heather Makowski - Pammy's First Holy Communion.

In the western Catholic Church children normally receive their first communion somewhere around the age of 7-10 depending on the child and the local parish. However in the Eastern Catholic churches children receive their first communion right after they are baptized as infants. How so you might ask, well the argument the Eastern churches present is that little children also need spiritual nutrition to grow up strong in the Lord. In their minds to deny the Eucharist, as spiritual food would be paramount to denying children milk for strong bones, teeth, and clear brain functioning. When you really think about it the Eastern argument makes a lot of sense.

Plus on the theological side of it here is another pointed fact that we can think about. Jesus said, "It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you, and appointed [or ordained] you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name He may give you. This I command you, love one another."

So you see, it is not a particular measurement of mental assent or maturity that Jesus requires of people for the heavenly gifts of redemption, Baptism, or the Eucharist. Hence the sacraments are given to us by God as a means of grace or food equipping all of us for the journey, indeed food that we all need.

Therefore, let us come joyfully to the feast of Heaven and earth, and together taste and see that the Lord is good.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.