

Fifth Sunday of Easter- B Cycle **May 3, 2015**

INTRODUCTION [*Acts 9, 26-31; 1 John 3, 18-24; John 15, 1-8*] Our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles is about St. Paul whose Jewish name was Saul. Here he is called by his Jewish name. Paul was a zealous Pharisee and a fierce persecutor of all who believed in Christ. He was most likely one of the leaders of the crowd who killed Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Once, as he was on his way to Damascus to search out Christians and arrest them, Jesus appeared to him. In an instant Paul realized Christians had it right and he was 100 percent wrong. His life turned around completely and he began preaching and teaching about Jesus - that he was Savior and Messiah. Even after Paul preached about Jesus for three years, the Christian community in Jerusalem was not convinced that he could be trusted. When he first showed up in Jerusalem, after his conversion (which is what we hear about in today's first reading), the disciples were afraid of him. The disciples did put complete faith in a disciple named Barnabas who testified that Paul's faith in Jesus was genuine. Thus, through Barnabas, Paul was welcomed into the community. However, there were a group of Jews who spoke Greek called the Hellenists. They refused to accept Paul because of his faith in Jesus and they saw him as a traitor to Judaism. For his own safety, Paul had to leave Jerusalem. He headed back to his hometown of Tarsus in modern day Turkey. He lived there for maybe three or four years before he began his famous missionary journeys which take up the final two-thirds of the Acts of the Apostles.

HOMILY: "I am the vine, you are the branches." Throughout John's gospel, Jesus is trying to reveal himself to us. In order to help us know him, Jesus uses the words "I Am" quite often. Sometimes he uses "I am" without a predicate such as when he said "Amen, Amen, I say to you, before Abraham came to be, I am." (Jn. 8, 58) Other times Jesus uses images to describe himself such as: "I am the light of the world," (Jn. 9, 5) or "I am the resurrection and the life," (Jn. 11 25) or "I am the good shepherd," (Jn. 10,11) or "I am the bread of life," (Jn. 6, 35), "I am the way, the truth and the life" (Jn. 14,6) or as we hear today: "I am the vine, you are the branches," (Jn. 15, 5).

To understand this image, we need to picture a vine in our minds. Most probably Jesus had in mind a grape vine as they are common all over the world. They are made up of a stem or stalk that is rooted in the ground and they contain many branches. The grapes grow on the branches. That is the whole vine. When Jesus says I am the vine, he is envisioning this entire plant. When he says you are the branches, he is telling us we are part of him; his life flows into us producing leaves and fruit and the fruit we produce is his love in us that flows out of us in the good works we do. It is an image that demonstrates the greatest possible union that we have with Jesus.

It's very similar to the image St. Paul uses in his first letter to the Corinthians when he tells us in Chapter 12 that we are the body of Christ. Just like the body is made up of many parts: hands, feet, heart, lungs, arms, legs, Christ is made up of many members, but we are all one in Christ.

This unity is established through believing in Jesus, hearing his word and following his teachings, and in a special way through the Eucharist. It is in the Eucharist that he feeds and nourishes us, just like the roots of the vine pull nourishment out of the ground and nourish the vine or like a hamburger sandwich which we eat nourishes all the parts of our body.

Jesus, who tells us "I am the bread of life," nourishes us with his word and with his own body and blood. I know myself, when my schedule gets really wild, and I don't get to spend some quiet time in church, I really feel the emptiness and chaos in my life and I have to get back here in church and spend some quiet time to get strength and peace again.

So our gospel focuses on three main actors: we have the Father who is the vine grower, Jesus who is the vine, and we who are the branches connected to and part of the vine. The Father who cares for the vine helps us and encourages us to produce more good works so God's love can show itself in a greater and greater way in the world. May God's life and love grow in us and may we always stay united with Jesus the vine through the bread of life he offers us each weekend. Amen.

Sixth Sunday of Easter- B Cycle

May 10, 2015

INTRODUCTION: Two thousand years ago, as the message of Jesus started to spread, a major issue arose in the early Church. Jesus was a Jew, the Apostles were Jews, and Jesus' first followers were Jews. The issue was: what about Gentiles who were pagans? When they became believers and followers of Jesus, should they be circumcised, and follow Jewish dietary laws, and celebrate on Jewish feasts, and offer sacrifices in the Temple as prescribed in the Torah. (*Acts 10, 25-26,34-35,44-48*)

St. Peter, the leader of the community of those who believed in Jesus, received the answer to this question in a very unusual way. While in prayer, God gave Peter a vision of many different birds and animals. Many of them were birds and animals the Jews were not allowed to eat, such as pork, shrimp, clams, oysters and many other creatures. (*Lev. 11,1-23*) God told Peter to eat them. Peter said he would never eat any food that the Law regarded as unclean. God said to him: "What God has made clean, you are not to call unclean." God repeated this three times to Peter. Then when the vision disappeared, God told Peter there were some men coming to see him and he was to go with them to the home of a Gentile named Cornelius, a high officer in the Roman army. A strict Jew was not allowed to enter a Gentile's house, but God told him to, so Peter did. Cornelius had a gathering of many relatives and friends (all pagan) at his home waiting for Peter. Cornelius told Peter an angel had appeared to him and told him to send for Peter. So Peter spoke to the group about Jesus. Almost Peter's entire speech has been left out of our reading, but you can look it up in your Bibles when you get home. Today's liturgy wants to focus on the response of the pagan Gentiles, how the

Holy Spirit came upon them and how Peter baptized them without insisting that they first convert to Judaism before accepting Jesus into their lives. This gave Peter the answer as to how the Apostles were to deal with Gentiles who wanted to convert to Christ.

HOMILY: *2nd Reading: 1 Jn: 4,7-10; Gospel: Jn 15,9-17* Happy mothers' day to all our mothers, grandmothers, step-mothers and others who offer motherly support in a loving way. Charles Dickens, taking a line from the book of Exodus, wrote about God visiting punishment on the next generation for the sins of their fathers. Dickens asked why God didn't say something about the blessings that God sent on the next generation for the virtues of their mothers. A good point! An overworked mother wrote into a newspaper that the quickest way for a mother to get her children's attention is to sit down and look comfortable. A Jewish proverb says "God could not be everywhere, and therefore he created mothers." (*various items from Holy Humor, by Cal and Rose Samra, pg 81-85*).

Love is in our minds and hearts today as we recall the love of our parents, specifically the love and dedication of our mothers. Love is also in the readings for today. Our first reading tells us of God's love as God reveals his love and salvation to people of every race and culture in the conversation of the Roman officer with his family and friends. John's letter, our second reading, tells us everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. In today's gospel, as Jesus gathers with his disciples at the Last Supper, he focuses his remarks on love. He had just told them, as we heard last week: "I am the vine, you are the branches. Remain in me, as I remain in you." The image of vine and branches symbolized the intimate sharing of life and love that we can have with him if we choose to remain in him.

I have spoken of love many times especially of the three words the Greeks had to describe love: agape, philia and eros. Eros you can figure out from the English word "erotic." Philia gave a name to one of our major cities, Philadelphia, which is called the city of brotherly love. Philia means friendship love. Whereas Philia refers to a kind of mutuality, two people benefitting from the relationship they have with each other, agape refers to an unselfish kind of love, a giving kind of love in which a person does not ask anything in return. God's love is agape. God's love is pure gift. We don't make God any richer or happier or greater than he already is when we love him, but when we love him, it is we who benefit, who are richer, happier and greater than we would be without him. God is always the giver – that's why we so often use the word "grace" in our theology because "grace" means gift.

Whenever we hear Jesus speak the word "love" in our reading today, in the original Greek version of the gospel, the word used was agape. He wants our love to be like his. "This is my commandment, love one another as I love you." How do we manage to have that kind of unselfish love, a love that is willing to lay down one's life for another? We can only have agape love with help from the source of all love, God who is love.

Jesus tells us we will be greatly blessed if we do what he tells us to do and if we keep his commandment (he calls it a commandment because we don't always feel like being loving people). Our blessings will be, first of all, joy: "I told you this so that my joy may

be in you.” We will know Christ’s friendship, we will be chosen to bear good fruit (i.e. we will do good works) and God will hear our prayers and answer them: “whatever you ask the Father in my name he will give you.” Does that give us enough reason to try to face each day and the people we meet (even our enemies) with agape love? Happy Mothers’ day to all the mothers who have loved their families with this kind of unselfish, devoted love. Amen.

Feast of the Ascension - B Cycle

May 17, 2015

If you think of the Ascension of Jesus as a historical event, you will be very confused if you try to figure out just where it took place and when. Matthew does not tell us when Jesus ascended, but he does tell us he ascended from Galilee. John seems to tell us that the ascension occurred most probably before Jesus appeared to the Apostles on Easter Sunday night. Luke tells us in his gospel that Jesus ascended from Bethany on Easter Sunday night, but in his second book, the Acts of the Apostles, he tells us Jesus ascended from the mount called Olivet (pretty much the same as Bethany) 40 days after Easter.

Mark’s gospel, which we have just heard briefly, tells of some of the appearances of Jesus found in Luke and John’s gospels. Mark’s gospel focuses on faith and baptism and the healing powers Jesus gave to the apostles. It does not tell us when the ascension took place. Today’s gospel describes the heavenly glory to which Jesus has returned as he directs the Apostles to preach the gospel to the whole world.

So you see, it’s hard to pin down the time and place of the ascension. It’s easier to think of it as a process rather than a historical moment. The process of ascending to the Father initially put an end to the visible activity of Jesus here on earth, except for those special times when Jesus appeared to someone. His human body, which he took on through the incarnation, would **now** be with his disciples in a spiritual way - while at the same time he would be gloriously enthroned at the right hand of God the Father. But for a period of time, perhaps in round numbers it was about 40 days, Jesus appeared often in order to strengthen the faith of the Apostles and to prepare them to witness to his life, death and resurrection to the ends of the earth.

There are many lessons we can draw from the ascension of Jesus. There is a passage in John’s gospel that is especially meaningful to me. It does not specifically describe the ascension of Jesus, but the ascension of Jesus is implied. It was said at the Last Supper by Jesus who was trying to help his disciples deal with the trauma they would soon be experiencing when Jesus would be arrested, tortured and crucified. Jesus said to them: “Do not let your hearts be troubled” (a big order with all that would soon happen). Jesus continued “you have faith in God; have faith also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you I will come

back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be.” (Jn. 14,1-3) These few verses presuppose the ascension and I find them most comforting. There is another world Jesus wants to make us a part of; a world where his glory and love will be fully revealed and experienced. Thomas asked the question: where is that world and how do we get there? Jesus told him that world will be found by following Jesus, for he said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (Jn. 14,6) Amen.

Pentecost – B Cycle

May 24, 2015

INTRODUCTION: We hear in our first reading St. Luke’s account in the Acts of the Apostles of the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. The Spirit came with a loud noise, tongues of fire, and the gift of the apostles being able to speak new languages. The coming of the Holy Spirit took place in the presence of Jews from all over the world. However, the greatest sign of God’s Spirit at work was the courage shown in the apostles, especially Peter who just weeks prior was afraid to admit that he even knew Jesus Christ. After the Spirit came, his fear was gone and he went out publicly preaching about him.

HOMILY: Pentecost is one of the oldest and one of the three most important feasts of the Jewish people. In Greek it means 50th day – that is 50 days from Passover. Passover celebrated God freeing his people from their slavery in Egypt. About a month and a half after leaving Egypt, God’s people arrived at Mt. Sinai where God made a covenant with his people identifying them as his special people. The Ten Commandments God gave them was part of that covenant. Pentecost was a day of pilgrimage when pious Jews would travel to Jerusalem to celebrate this event. Jesus’ followers were there, 50 days after Jesus’ resurrection. On that occasion, we are told the Spirit came with a loud noise – like a strong wind – and in tongues of fire, symbols recalling the way God was experienced on Mt. Sinai hundreds of years earlier. Also the Apostles received a unique gift of tongues to be able to speak in foreign languages. Since Jerusalem was filled with pilgrims at this time, the Apostles knew what they were supposed to do with this unusual gift - to tell anyone around, no matter from what distant place they came, the good news about Jesus Christ.

A person can hardly talk about Pentecost without talking about the Holy Spirit. But that opens up a very large topic. I pulled out my book on the Holy Spirit, almost 600 pages long, to help me decide what to say. Even though there’s much that could be said, we still struggle when we try to think about what the Holy Spirit might be like, might look like, or to try to make contact with the Spirit. We are taught the Holy Spirit is God, the third person of the Holy Trinity. The Holy Spirit will help us if we happen to have to take a test. Pretty much this is all the typical Catholic knows about the Holy Spirit and I’ll bet the normal Catholic is greatly surprised to discover that someone could have written a 600-page book all about the Holy Spirit.

Let me just mention some of the symbols of the Holy Spirit that are mentioned in the Scriptures. The first one is breath, air or wind. Jesus breathed on them and said “receive the Holy Spirit.” Jesus’ breath imparted the Spirit. Water is another symbol.

Jesus said: "let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as scripture says. Rivers of living water will flow from within him." He said this in reference to the Spirit. (Jn 7,37-39) Fire has been a symbol of God since the days of Moses and the burning bush. That's why red is the color of the Holy Spirit. A dove is a familiar image, but trying to explain the symbolism of a dove would take a few more paragraphs, so we won't go there. Less familiar is the anointing by the Spirit which Jesus talks about using a quote from Isaiah: "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me." (Lk, 4,18) The finger of God is another symbol. It is by the finger of God, the symbol of God's power, that Jesus casts out demons (Lk 11,20). There are other names and symbols of the Spirit, such as Paraclete, which would take more time to explain than we have right now. The last symbol I would like to consider is the symbol of the Spirit being a gift from the Father and the Son. Although Jesus is God's gift to us, it is the Spirit who is mostly referred to as a gift (Acts 8,20; Jn 4,10 & 4,14; Acts 2,38, 10,45 and 11,17 Heb 6,4-6) My favorite reference to the Spirit as a gift: "what father among you would hand his son a snake when he asks for a fish: Or hand him a scorpion when he asks for an egg? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" (Lk.11,12) I am grateful that God is so lavish with God's gift of the Spirit, but if I put them all together, I still struggle, in spite of all the symbols the Scriptures use, to relate to the Spirit, to connect with the Spirit, to know the Spirit as a person.

A thought came to me this week that helped me picture the Spirit a little more concretely. Look into your own heart or look into a mirror. St. Paul asks: "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you." (I Cor 3,16) I'm not saying every simple detail you see in yourself is of God. It may not be. Paul lists a whole batch of human traits that are not of God: "idolatry, hatred, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, selfishness, envy, etc." Paul also gives us a long list of traits that are from God: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." (Gal, 5,19-24) Do you see these traits in yourselves, do you see them in others, then you are seeing what the Holy Spirit looks like.

We should see these traits in the Church too, for the Holy Spirit, as we just heard, gave life to the Church at Pentecost by sending the Apostles out to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. Without Pentecost, the Church would have died a quick death because the Apostles were too afraid to proclaim Jesus Christ. But with the Spirit, the Church came alive. That's why we call Pentecost the birthday of the Church. It is through grace and the Sacraments, the Spirit continues to work to help the Church to grow. Take a look at yourself in the mirror sometime this evening or take a look at a friend whom you love and who believes in God as you do and say to yourself "that's what the Spirit looks like when we hold God in our hearts." Amen.

Trinity Sunday - B Cycle

May 31, 2015

INTRODUCTION – (*Deut. 4,32-34.39-40; Rom 8,14-17; Mt. 28,16-20*)

This is the time for commencement addresses as people graduate and move on in life. Today's first reading is like a commencement address Moses is giving to God's people as they prepare to enter the Promised Land. Moses knew he had to part from the people for he was soon to die. So he shares some words of wisdom with the people before they crossed the Jordan into the Land that would be their new home. He tells them there is no other God than the Lord (Yahweh) and that only by being faithful to their God will they prosper. His advice is good advice for today's world where polytheism and paganism, which were popular in the days of Moses, have been replaced by atheism, hedonism and materialism.

HOMILY – Today's feast traces its origin back to the fourth century during the time of the Arian heresy. Arianism taught that Jesus was not fully God. It taught that he was a creature higher than the angels but not equal to God the Father. The heresy almost destroyed the Church. The Council of Nicea (in 325 A.D.) proclaimed that Jesus was equal to the Father in every way and we profess that as our faith every week in the Nicene Creed. Indeed it is a great mystery how God is three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. These three persons are so closely united in nature and in love that we proclaim there is only one God. This mystery is revealed to us in the Scriptures and it helps us understand the Scriptures better, but it remains a mystery and will always be a mystery until we are fully united with the Trinity in heaven. There is one important element that can help us understand the Trinity just a little bit more, and that is love. In everyday experience we have seen that love has the power to draw two people together and make them one in mind and heart and yet the two people retain their individuality. The Bible tells us God is love, and it is the power of divine love that makes Father, Son and Holy Spirit one God without destroying the distinction between the three persons. It is that love that overflowed and created the universe. It is that love that made us, redeemed us and has forgiven our sins and that calls us to enjoy eternal bliss in the kingdom of heaven when it comes time for us to leave this world.

Now I need to change the subject. (volunteers start passing out "Dedication Weekend" cards.) About three months ago I spoke about a major campaign in the Archdiocese that all parishes would participate in called One Faith, One Hope, One Love. We have not had a campaign like this since 1955 when I graduated from High School. The campaign in '55 was meant primarily to build Catholic High Schools. This current campaign is meant to give financial aid to parents who want to get their children into a Catholic school but who cannot afford the full tuition. One Faith, One Hope, One Love will also be used to help the poor through Catholic Social Services; it will help support priests in their retirement (with priests living longer and with fewer younger priests the retirement fund is greatly underfunded); it will help promote vocations; and 20 % of what we raise will come back to St. Boniface to be used for whatever projects we might have. We thought increasing parking close to Church would be a worthwhile project.

Today is meant to wrap up all our efforts to reach our goal. We could make it in the next couple of weeks. We have gifts and pledges of about \$500,000 which means we are about \$70,000 short of our goal. I have been so impressed with the generosity of our parishioners. I thank you. And I thank Rick Salerno and his group of volunteers for all their work throughout these past six months. What we want to do today is to be sure everyone has been contacted. You should have received a card like this.

Before I describe the card I want you to fill out, I want to say this: a kind person I know has offered \$40,000 as a matching gift to help us reach our goal. If we get pledges today, or any increases, up to \$40,000, my friend will match it. So if you give \$500 dollars it will be like you just gave \$1000.

Please print your name, address, etc. on the card. (this will help keep our census up to date too). On that same side of the card, there are four options and I would ask if you would check one: 1) that you are making a pledge today, 2) that you have already made a pledge, 3) that you are still thinking about it, or 4) that you cannot participate at this time. If you have said "no" we will not try to twist your arm.

If you checked that you will make a pledge today, just fill in the blanks at the bottom of the card. If you are still making up your mind, we will try to get back to you. It would be a great favor to us if you check off something, so we know we contacted you and we won't keep trying to reach you.

I will give you a couple of minutes to fill out the card, then fold them in half and the ushers will collect them. After the cards are collected, we will have our regular offertory collection. Thank you for your patience and again I thank every person who has had some part in helping us attain the level of success we have achieved.