



## Fifth Sunday of Easter - B

In the first reading (Acts 9:26-31) Saul tried to join the disciples in Jerusalem but was unable to do so because they were afraid of him and did not believe he had become a disciple. Barnabas then introduced him to the apostles, reporting how Saul had seen the Lord and spoke to Him and how he had spoken boldly in Damascus in the name of Jesus. Then Saul began to speak boldly in Jerusalem and debated with the Hellenists but they tried to kill him. The brothers took him to Caesarea and sent him to Tarsus. The Church was at peace and grew in numbers as they walked in the fear of the Lord with the consolation of the Holy Spirit.

Something to Think About:

1. It had been three years since Saul had a vision of Jesus, yet the people in Jerusalem were still fearful of him. They knew that he had capitulated in the stoning of Stephen and perhaps others. They were weary that he might be trying to infiltrate their group and put them to death. Am I willing to give someone a second chance who has harmed me or someone I love be it physically, emotionally or spiritually? Am I willing to forgive them their trespasses so that I too might be forgiven my transgressions by my heavenly Father?

2. Barnabas was true to his name which means “son of encouragement.” He took Saul under his care and introduced him to the apostles. Paul writes in Galatians that he had only met with Peter and James and had only stayed in Jerusalem for fifteen days. Having been encouraged by Barnabas and the other believers Saul goes off and begins to preach to the very group of people that he had been with at Stephen’s murder: i.e. Greek-speaking Jews or Hellenists. They, however, were not impressed and began to plot to murder Saul as well. The believers helped him get out of town and on to his way to his home in Tarsus. Am I willing to put myself in harm’s way in order to help another believer in Jesus? How far am I willing to go?

3. As Barnabas had encouraged Saul so too did the Holy Spirit encourage the early believers to spread the good news to others. The Holy Spirit was given to me in baptism and in a more complete way in confirmation. In the later sacrament He bestowed on me His supernatural gifts, including courage. Do I exercise this gift by speaking to others about Jesus? Do I speak not in a threatening way but in a way that would encourage them to realize that Jesus has come to save them?

In the second reading (1 Jn 3:18-24) the author calls his readers little children and exhorts them to love in deed and truth and not just in words and speech. If their hearts do not condemn them, it is because they keep God’s commandments and do what pleases Him. Then they should have confidence in God and receive whatever they ask of Him. His commandment is to believe in Jesus and love one another. Those who do so remain in Him and He in them. They know this because of the Spirit that He gave them. Something to Think About:

1. The author of this letter, writing in the apostle John’s name, addresses these comments to “little children.” At other parts of the letter he will address others as “young men” and still others as “fathers.” The early church fathers taught that he was not addressing people according to age but rather according to their spiritual maturity. “Little children” refers to spiritual beginners. “Young men” refers to those who are more spiritually advanced. And “fathers” refers to those who are most spiritually advanced. Later these stages would be identified as the Purgative, Illuminative, and Unitive Stages of Spiritual development. During the time of the Purgative way the soul’s main concern is one’s awareness of his/her sin, sorrow for the past and a desire to atone for any offenses against God. During the time of the Illuminative way the soul seeks enlightenment of the mind in the ways of God and a clear understanding of His will in his/her life. Finally

in the Unitive way the soul is concerned with the presence of God and in forming a habitual disposition of conformity to the will of God. All three levels may be more or less present at any time in a person's life.

2. The author is adamant that the love he is speaking about is more than an emotion, It is more than just words. It requires action. Loving God is more than not blaspheming His name, having idols or not keeping the Sabbath holy. Loving our neighbor is more than obeying our parents, not killing, stealing, committing adultery, coveting, or lying. For the author it is the great commandment that Jesus gives His disciples during the last supper in John's gospel: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." He is calling his readers and us to a self-sacrificial love: i.e. to be willing to lay down our lives for one another or to lay down our will for the sake of another. Then Jesus promises to abide in us.

In the gospel (Jn 15:1-8) Jesus proclaims that He is the true vine and that His Father is the vine grower. The Father removes every branch that does not bear fruit and the one that do bear fruit, He prunes so that they might bear more fruit. Jesus' disciples were already pruned because of the word that Jesus spoke to them. Unless we, the branches, remain attached to Jesus, the vine, we cannot bear fruit. Those who remain in Jesus will bear much fruit while those who do not will be thrown into the fire. If we remain in Jesus and His words, we can ask for whatever we want and it will be done for us. The Father is glorified when we bear fruit and become Jesus' disciples.

Something to Think About:

1. Jesus uses the metaphor of the vine and branches to teach His disciples and us about the relationship among His Father, Himself and us. A healthy vine can produce as much as 80 pounds of fruit but in order for it to do so there are certain conditions that much be met. These have several implications for our spiritual life we are to become fruitful as well. For example, we know that in order for a branch to produce fruit it must have a sufficient supply of water and nutrients. This implies that we will need Christ's life and love to flow through us if we are to be spiritually productive. We know that vines can be attacked by insects and disease and that these need to be pruned away so as not to affect the rest of the vine. This implies that we need to rid ourselves of ongoing sin to avoid contagion. We know that new branches need to be prune for several years before they will

produce. This implies that it will take time for us to grow spiritually. We know that the vine needs to be properly pruned to bring about fruitfulness. This implies that we need God's word, wisdom and will in our spiritual life. We know that a vineyard cannot be left alone but requires a vinedresser to bring about fruitfulness. This implies that we need God's guidance. Finally, we know that branches that are separated from the vine cannot grow and cannot produce any fruit. This implies that we will die spiritually as soon as we think we can survive without the vine, Jesus.

2. The branch derives its very life and strength from the vine. When the branch has too many attachments, its strength is used to support these unfruitful appendages. Many of us have set high priorities on things in our lives that have nothing to do with our eternal salvation. We spend way too much of our energies on such activities to the detriment of our producing fruit for the kingdom. We often have little time or little energy left to do the simple things that God has asked of us: for example, praying or lovingly doing good for someone else. There are probably some activities in each of our lives that ought to be pruned back or cut off completely, so that we can devote the proper attention and energy to what bears fruit. What are some of the things that take up the majority of my time? Are they bearing eternal fruit? Do I fill up my time with things that do not help me mentally, physically or spiritually? Can these extraneous activities be cut back? Should they be eliminated?

3. Things do not always go the way we would like in our lives. Can I trust that sometimes God prunes some things away so that I might be able to bear more fruit? Sometimes I look at things from a myopic point of view whereas God knows the bigger picture. Can I trust that He loves me more than I love myself and that He always does what is best for me even though I might not be able to understand the reason that things happen the way they do at the time?

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