

May 17, 2020

St. Augustine Cathedral 10:00 a.m. Livestream

Sixth Sunday of Easter

On this Sixth Sunday of Easter, with Springtime in full bloom, we are more than half-way through this month of May, which normally would be filled with all kinds of activities and special events. Unfortunately most of those are either now being celebrated virtually, or being rescheduled until some time in the Fall. Included in those major events are Graduations, and so I want to take a moment to congratulate all Graduates---High School, College, Graduate School; in spite of the very extraordinary ways in which you are observing this major event in your lives, it remains a huge achievement, and I join in wishing you well, assuring you of our prayers, and asking God's special graces for you as you move into the next chapter of your young lives.

There are glimmers of hope as our State quarantine is scheduled to be lifted in less than 2 weeks, and as our Diocese is moving closer to beginning the public celebration of Masses at that same time. However, we also are very much aware that even when the "stay home-stay safe" order is lifted, or after we begin "Level 1" of our public Masses on a very limited basis, we're still a long way from returning to "normal". Yet, life goes on, and somehow or another, we keep moving forward on our life journey, even during these unprecedented times of this worldwide pandemic.

We find the same reality here in our Liturgical life. Even though this is now the 8th Sunday that we have been here and you have been there, the Easter Season continues to move forward, and the powerful Solemnity of Pentecost is only two weeks from today.

Last Sunday, today and next Sunday, our Gospel Readings are taken from what we call "Jesus' Farewell Discourse" ---- which in St. John's Gospel takes 5 chapters to complete. Today's Gospel passage picks up where last Sunday's left off. These 6 brief verses we just heard contain some significant theological revelation, but they also form a very simple, though profound, conclusion.

Let's start with the conclusion. Jesus begins this passage by using a classic "if.....then" proposition, namely: "*If you love Me, then you will keep My commandments.*" That's about as simple as it gets, right? But my goodness,

that's also as profound as it gets. I would also say---it's as human as it gets. Isn't that the basis of our human relationships of love and friendship? *If you love me, you'll remain faithful to me and be my friend always.* Those very special human relationships won't endure unless there's that kind of understanding.

When Jesus talks about "*My commandments*", He's not talking about the Ten Commandments that God gave Moses on Mt. Sinai. That's probably what we think of though when we hear the word "commandments"----the basic rules, guidelines, requirements that we need to follow as people of Faith. Jesus is assuming all of that as a starting point. But He's talking about so much more than us following basic rules, or adhering to what's required for us to be in a "relationship" with Him. When Jesus talks about "His commandments", He's talking about everything that we know as the Gospel---the Good News of Jesus. When Jesus talks about "His commandments", He's assuming that we will choose to live according to the Beatitudes and everything else He preached in that Sermon on the Mount. He's including the teachings of all the Parables which taught about love, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, justice, and charity. When Jesus talks about "His commandments", He's talking about what He had just done to the Apostles at the Last Supper, when, without a word, He got up, and washed His Apostles' feet, and then asked: "*Do you understand that what I just did was to give you an example; as I have done, so you must do.*" So when Jesus talks about "His commandments", He is teaching us that He, and we who follow Him, are *called to serve, not to be served*. When Jesus talks about "His commandments", He's talking about how He summed up all the commandments, Old and New, into two, which are really one great command: that we are to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength; and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

So, back to the "If....Then" proposition: If we truly love Jesus, then we will keep His commandments---live by His teachings---follow His example---and allow Him to live within us. As Jesus says at the very end of today's brief passage: "*Whoever has My commandments and observes them, is the one who loves Me, (and is the one who) will be loved by My Father.*"

What's so critically important for us to remember, or to come to realize anew, during this Easter Season is that our Faith is all about a real, vibrant, relationship with Jesus that must be rooted in mutual Love---our Love for Jesus, and the Love of His Father and Himself for us. "Keeping Jesus' commandments" is not so much a requirement, as much as it is a natural consequence that would automatically result. Because we love Jesus, of course we will live in His Love---we will profess

our Faith and Trust in Him----we will allow the Gospel, what Jesus refers to as “His commandments”, to guide our choices and direct our life’s journey.

Knowing what a challenge that will be for the Apostles, especially after He completes His mission of suffering, death and Resurrection over the next 3 days, Jesus assures His Apostles----and us----that He is not abandoning us; there’s no need for us to feel like “*orphans*”. In fact, He promises that He will send an “*Advocate*”---the Paraclete---the *Spirit of Truth*---Who will be with us always---and Who in fact will live in us.

These are some of the complex theological revelations that I referred to earlier. These were all brand new concepts for the Apostles; it was hard for them to understand what He was saying to them. And even for us, who have the advantage of 2,000 years of the lived experience of the Church, it’s still hard for us to understand the power and presence of the Holy Spirit---the Spirit of Truth---the Paraclete Who is our Advocate. But we have to keep making that effort, because--and this is very important--- until we can open ourselves to the guidance, inspiration and encouragement of the Holy Spirit, we’re not going to completely understand that our relationship with Jesus Himself is all about a mutual exchange of His Love for us and our Love for Him/for His Father, and in turn, our Love for one another. It’s that simple, yet that profound.

As Jesus prepares the Apostles, with His Farewell Discourse, for His departure from them, we also heard Him say “*In a little while the world will no longer see Me.*” That is the painful part. But then He continues: “*But you will see Me, because I live, and you will live in Me*”. Since Jesus is leaving this world (which we will celebrate next Sunday on the Solemnity of the Ascension), and as Jesus tells us, “*the world will no longer see Me*”; then HOW is it that we will see Jesus? The answer is found in what we’re gathered together to celebrate today---actually or virtually----and what it is that we celebrate each and every Sunday, in fact each and every day-----and which the Universal Church has celebrated every day for 2,000 years. We “see” Jesus in the Eucharist. Just as surely as when Jesus first gave us the Gift of His Body and Blood as our Food and Drink at the Last Supper; just as surely as those two Disciples on the Road to Emmaus recognized Jesus “*in the breaking of the Bread*”; so, just as surely do we know what takes place during every celebration of the Mass: Jesus is Present with us always in this most precious Gift of the Eucharist to help us to follow His commandments, and to live in His Love.

But the other indispensable Gift that Jesus gives us is what we will celebrate in two weeks on the Solemnity of Pentecost---that powerful Gift of the Holy Spirit---the Advocate that Jesus promised to send us. We can't live our lives faithfully without the guidance of the Holy Spirit; we can't live our lives with Hope in the midst of all that we encounter in the world that discourages, depresses and tempts us, without the Holy Spirit; we can't proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ with courage, conviction and passion, without the Flame of the Holy Spirit igniting our hearts; we can't live our lives with Joy without the Sevenfold Gifts of the Holy Spirit; and we can't keep Jesus' Commandments and live in His Love without the power and strength of the Holy Spirit.

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, please spend time each day over these next two weeks----make this an extended Novena----and pray fervently for the Holy Spirit to enter into our lives in a new way.

As I wrote in my recent Pastoral Letter, *"From Darkness to Light: Hope for a New Pentecost"*, *"my hope and prayer is that...we will allow that same Holy Spirit Who filled the hearts of the first Apostles...to change our hearts and transform us from passive participants to active promoters of our faith. I also pray that our celebration of Pentecost this year will be a time when each of us----me, all our priests, deacons, lay faithful from oldest to youngest---will personally invite the Holy Spirit to renew us, as He did the first Apostles, and empower and embolden us to be joyful disciples and effective witnesses to the Risen Jesus in our lives."*

And that remains my fervent prayer for all of us today. For: **if** the Holy Spirit truly guides our lives, **then** we will not only Love Jesus with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, but we will also joyfully, willingly and courageously "keep His commandments", especially to love one another.