

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

MAY 2, 2021

In a recent recording of a book that the monks listened to, the author tells of his asking a priest in Alaska up near the Arctic circle what is the biggest challenge of teaching the Christian story? The priest responded, “The people have never seen a sheep.” The Bible, after all, is full of imagery of sheep and shepherds. Well, I grew up in New York City and I never saw a sheep either, nor a vine of grapes that would become wine. Later, in my teen years, I lived at a seminary that had a farm. We didn’t have any sheep but I do remember cutting heads off chickens and helping a cow to deliver its calf. This was an important part of my education.

Exposure to and immersion in the world of nature, to wild animals, to growing vines, plants and trees, to the movements of the natural world are an important aspect of being human. Children know that when they are exposed to nature. On top of Turkey Hill near us is the Weir River Farm. Children from the locality and the city are brought there to be taught about real life. They know this. I am not sure about girls but, as boys, we liked getting dirty and even immersed in mud. We intuitively felt more human.

We live now in an artificial culture full of technological, mechanical, plastic realities. So many people walk around plugged into their smart phones, for instance while at the ocean, and miss the crash of water, birds flying, winds blowing. Yes, the gulls may let their droppings fall on you but that is life too.

When I ask myself why all this is so, I tend to think it is because we need organic, living life around us. Certainly we need other humans beings with whom to share life, to touch, to laugh and cry with. We have certainly been reminded of this need during the past year’s pandemic. But we also need other fellow beings of our planet –plants, animals, rocks and trees and fire and water. They were all here before we humans appeared and it is their world as well as ours. They, in fact, tell us who we are and give us the support to grow in that identity.

What has that all to do with our relation to God? Everything! Our relation to Jesus Christ, who is our way to God, is a living and personal one. Bibles, formal prayers, attendance at Mass and taking part in rituals, all support our faith but it has to be, at its center, an intimate, personal friendship with Jesus.

Last week the Risen Lord was portrayed as a shepherd who cares for us, his sheep, and protects and guides us. Today's image of the vine and the branches is a life-giving relationship. God the Father is the vinedresser. Jesus is the vine. We, part of this living vine, are the branches. And all human beings and all creatures of the earth are branches on this vine. We are related, through Christ, to all that exists. Furthermore, we, once baptized, are also to be the vine in Jesus and help nurture all the other branches of the world's creation. We can never just care for our own branch. We have a mission to bring the joy and peace of the risen Christ to a world still in need of redemption.

May we have the courage to stand against- self-interest and use the gifts of our lives to promote life in its fullness for all God's people, especially those most in need.

Finally, let us trust that whatever hardships we endure for our commitment to discipleship with Jesus, we can see as the necessary pruning for us to become healthier branches, life-giving branches. May we never be cut off from the vine of true life that leads us to the fullness of God's love and his final reign over all of creation.

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