

FIFTH SUNDAY IN EASTER

May 15, 2022

This week we have passed the midpoint of the Easter season – four weeks since Easter Sunday and three weeks until Pentecost Sunday. This season, with its particular scripture readings, was designed to help newly baptized Christians to learn what it meant to live as a Christian. And then later it became a time for all of us who are baptized Christians to renew, relearn, recover what being a disciple of Jesus Christ should mean for all of us in our own time and place.

Well, folks, today the gospel hits us between the eyes. What is Christianity about? Listen again to the words of Jesus in the gospel.

“I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also must love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Is this how people recognize us that we love one another? Well, we have to admit that this is a life-long pursuit, learning to love as Jesus loved. But is it our goal? We all want love and to be loved but to love as Jesus loved us? Jesus began by teaching the love of God, but inseparably linked that love with love of neighbor, with the understanding that the neighbor includes the other, the outsider, the outcast, the last, the least, the lost, the disgraced, the dispossessed, and the enemy. Today we would add love for all creatures and all creation. Jesus never made a distinction between the deserving and the non-deserving.

Our Church was settled in this nation as a community to assist the poor, the immigrant, the outsider who felt unwelcome in an anti-Catholic country. And I know the church did this for my parents and grandparents. In the nineteenth century Bishops such as Cardinal James Gibbons fought for the rights of the working man, against child labor, for the protection of families. For various historical reasons, that is a church of the past. The twentieth century saw the emergence of Catholics who were accepted and who excelled in the tasks of building our country, fighting for our country, leading our country. Church was often reduced to getting to Mass on Sunday and the remnants of this ethos are still with us.

Now the Church is shrinking. Many have walked away. So many young people feel no need for Church, and sometimes not for Christ or God as well.

And thus Easter calls us back to what Christianity is really about.

Many of us have settled for a transactional type of religion. I go to Mass, I say these particular prayers, I make this novena, I keep the nine first Fridays, I try to please God and get God's blessings on my way of life. I feel blessed if all goes well with my life.

Then we hear "This is the way people know you are my disciples if you love one another." Christ, from the beginning of his ministry, preached the need for conversion, that is to see life from a higher point of view than our culture teaches us. Instead of a transactional religion, this is a way of transformation. We are to become lovers. We are to enter into a relationship with Christ. Through Christ we come to know God loves us and we don't have to do anything to earn this love. But being loved draws us to love God in return and love one another. This is our goal in life. This is what the church should do to support us in this journey of becoming lovers.

The way of love is harder than keeping rules. In our reading from Acts, Paul told the congregation of the Church in Antioch, "It is necessary to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of heaven." The paschal mystery, the center of Easter, means dying to self and rising with Christ. May we all overcome our selfishness, our insularity, our privatized lives so we can live for others and learn to love as Jesus has loved us.

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