

Gratitude Foundation



*“Were not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?
Has only this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?”*

(Lk. 17:15-17)

Fifth Sunday of Easter—Year B

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“In all things give thanks, it is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”

(1 Thess: 5:18)

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Reading 1

Acts 9:26-31

When Saul arrived in Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples,
but they were all afraid of him,
not believing that he was a disciple.
Then Barnabas took charge of him and brought him to the apostles,
and he reported to them how he had seen the Lord,
and that he had spoken to him,
and how in Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.
He moved about freely with them in Jerusalem,
and spoke out boldly in the name of the Lord.
He also spoke and debated with the Hellenists,
but they tried to kill him.
And when the brothers learned of this,
they took him down to Caesarea
and sent him on his way to Tarsus.

The church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria was at peace.
It was being built up and walked in the fear of the Lord,
and with the consolation of the Holy Spirit it grew in numbers.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 22:26-27, 28, 30, 31-32

R. (26a) I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.

I will fulfill my vows before those who fear the LORD.
The lowly shall eat their fill;
they who seek the LORD shall praise him:
"May your hearts live forever!"

R. I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.

All the ends of the earth
shall remember and turn to the LORD;
all the families of the nations
shall bow down before him.

R. I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.

To him alone shall bow down
all who sleep in the earth;
before him shall bend
all who go down into the dust.

R. I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.

And to him my soul shall live;
my descendants shall serve him.
Let the coming generation be told of the LORD
that they may proclaim to a people yet to be born
the justice he has shown.

R. I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.

Reading 2

1 John 3:18-24

Children, let us love not in word or speech
but in deed and truth.
Now this is how we shall know that we belong to the truth
and reassure our hearts before him
in whatever our hearts condemn,
for God is greater than our hearts and knows everything.
Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us,
we have confidence in God
and receive from him whatever we ask,
because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.
And his commandment is this:
we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ,
and love one another just as he commanded us.
Those who keep his commandments remain in him, and he in them,
and the way we know that he remains in us
is from the Spirit he gave us.

Alleluia

John 15:4a, 5b

R. Alleluia, alleluia.
Remain in me as I remain in you, says the Lord.
Whoever remains in me will bear much fruit.
R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

John 15:1-8

Jesus said to his disciples:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower.

He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit,
and every one that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit.

You are already pruned because of the word that I spoke to you.

Remain in me, as I remain in you.

Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own

unless it remains on the vine,

so neither can you unless you remain in me.

I am the vine, you are the branches.

Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit,
because without me you can do nothing.

Anyone who does not remain in me

will be thrown out like a branch and wither;

people will gather them and throw them into a fire

and they will be burned.

If you remain in me and my words remain in you,

ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you.

By this is my Father glorified,

that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

Exegesis

Acts 9:26-31

Chapter 8 of the *Acts of the Apostles* describes the terrible persecution that the early Church experienced, of which Saul was a leader. Chapter 9 begins with the conversion of Saul/Paul and his subsequent baptism. It continues with his preaching and rejection in Damascus and then his arrival in Jerusalem where our pericope begins. The Damascus and Jerusalem events are portrayed as happening shortly after the conversion experience of Paul. This conflicts with Paul's own account following his conversion as he writes in *Galatians*: "...nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles, before me; rather, I went into Arabia and then returned to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to confer with Kephaz and remained with him for fifteen days." (Gal 1: 17-18) The only thing that differs is the timing of the events. My personal thought is that perhaps Paul quickly experienced the harsh opposition in Damascus and Jerusalem and then went off to Arabia for three years.

In any event Paul was facing opposition from all sides. The Church was aware of his previous intense persecution. His fellow Jews now saw him as a traitor. Paul boldly spoke out in the face of this persecution, now directed towards him, even to the point of threats on his life. Because of the intense persecution the brothers sent him on to Caesarea and beyond into Gentile territory. This would later direct and inspire Paul to become the apostle to the Gentiles. Perhaps without the persecution from all sides Paul would have remained comfortably with the early Church in Jerusalem. In the face of persecution, the Church quickly spread. This is a good lesson for us today.

Psalm 22:26-27, 28, 30, 31-32

From the Cross Jesus proclaimed, "My God, My God, why have you abandoned Me?" These words echo verse one of *Psalm 22*. At the time of Jesus, it was common practice for someone to recite the first verse of a psalm or scripture in which listeners would call to mind the entire psalm or scripture passage. And so, it is important to look at Psalm 22 in its entirety. Our pericope today is the conclusion of Psalm 22 minus verse 29. The psalm is entitled *The Prayer of an Innocent Person*.

There is a movement in the psalm. There is a sense of abandonment and persecution that would seem to describe in some detail the passion and crucifixion of Jesus. There is an emptying of one's life, e.g. "Like water my life drains away." (Ps 22:15) In this distress there seems to be no one to help. There is a sense of abandonment and God forsakenness. At verse 20 the psalm turns, "But you, Lord, do not stay far off." Subsequent verses speak of salvation.

The movement of the psalm parallels the Passion, the Death and the Resurrection of the Lord, and the proclamation of the Risen Christ. The verses chosen for us today focus on that proclamation that concludes and is summarized by the final verse, "The generations to come will be told of the Lord, that they may proclaim to a people yet unborn the deliverance You have brought."

Exegesis (Continued)

1 John 3:18-24

Our pericope from John today is entitled *Confidence Before God*. In his letters John the beloved disciple beautifully captures the words of Jesus. In our passage today from his *First Letter* John echoes the words of the *Last Supper Discourse*. In his Gospel he captures the many of the I AM statements of Jesus including: “I AM the Way and the Truth and the Life.” Jesus is the Truth. John again equates Jesus with Truth in verse 19: “This is how we shall know that we belong to the Truth and reassure our heart before Him.” The word that we translate in English as *truth* is *alethia* in Greek and *emeth* in Hebrew. As the word evolves in scripture it has taken on a much deeper meaning than our typical English connotation of truth. In the OT it speaks of the firm, reliable, faithfulness of God, as in God’s steadfast and unchanging love. It distinguishes reality from mere assertion of reality. In the NT Jesus is the Truth, He is the manifestation of reality. The Paraclete, being the *Spirit of Truth*, continues the work of Christ. The distinctive element in the NT is that both in John and Paul *truth* is the Christological Truth.¹

When we abide in Christ we abide in Truth. When we abide in Christ we abide in love. When we abide in Christ, we abide in life eternal. When we abide in Christ, we are connected to the source of all that was, is and ever will be. This is what John calls belief or faith. In the eyes of the beloved disciple faith equals eternal life. John concludes our passage today, “the way we know that He remains is us is from the Spirit He gave us.” St. Basil the Great describes the indwelling Spirit as follows: “The Spirit instills in us His life-giving power awakening our souls from the death of sin to the life that they had in the beginning.”

1. Joseph Moller and Waldemer Molinski, *Truth*, ed. Adolf Darlap. *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology* (New York; London: Burns & Oates; Herder and Herder, 1968-1970, 308-309.

Exegesis (Continued)

John 15:1-8

The beautiful Last Supper Discourse of John's Gospel consists of Chapters 14 through 17. Chapter 15 is at the center of this discourse and is the heart and soul of Jesus' message to His apostles and to the world. The chapter can be broken down into three distinct sections: *To abide in Jesus* (15:1-11), *the commandment to love* (15:12-17), *to be hated by the world* (15:18-16:3).

The focus of our pericope from the beginning of Chapter 15 is the call of Jesus to abide in Him. In our Gospel translation today, the word *abide* is translated *remain*. The word *abide*, *menein* in the original Greek, not only describes the prevailing theme of the Last Supper Discourse but of the entire Gospel of John. This is what John means by belief or faith, i.e. to abide in Christ. And for John faith equals eternal life.

Andrew Murray published a monograph in 1895 entitled *Abide in Christ*. This 236-page book is dedicated to John 15:1-11 and has been quoted often by scholars over the years. One of his definitions of *abiding in Jesus* taken from page 26 is as follows: "Abiding in Jesus is nothing but the giving up of oneself to be ruled and taught and led, and so resting in the arms of Everlasting Love."

St. Paul talks about living in Christ. He said, "It is no longer I who lives, but Christ who lives in me." It would be easy to presume that Paul is surrendering his own individuality, his own consciousness, in this statement. In fact, the indwelling Spirit to the Risen Lord respects our human consciousness and our freewill. The indwelling abiding presence merely raises and illuminates our consciousness. St. Augustine calls this *Diving Illumination*. Augustine would also say that God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. To connect with this indwelling divine presence requires an inward movement into what Augustine calls the *innermost man*.

There is a mutuality, a reciprocity, a deep relationship of love at the heart of an abiding presence. We must open ourselves, die to ourselves, empty ourselves to connect with the Spirit of the Risen Lord. He desires to be in this deep abiding relationship of love with each one of us. Jesus prayed later at the Last Supper, "Father may they be one as you and I are one."

The beautiful metaphor of the *Vine and the Branches* describe this call to mutual oneness. The Greek word used for vine is *ampelos*, which is a plant that produces grapes, i.e. a grapevine. The word describes the entire plant. There are distinct words to describe different parts of the vine like the vine stem, e.g. the stem of the vine that was transplanted in the wilderness (Ezekiel 19:10-14). So, when Jesus proclaims, "I AM (*ego eimi*) the true vine and you are the branches," He is not saying that He is the vine stem, and we are the branches connected to Him. He is saying that we are a part of Him. He is the entire vine and we as branches of the vine subsist in Him. The Risen Lord questioned Saul: "Saul, Saul why are you persecuting Me?" Jesus makes no distinction between Himself and His Church; because in fact, we share in His divine nature as temples of the Holy Spirit. This, of course, is all predicated on the fact that we remain on the vine which is possible by exercising our individual freewill to do so.

Reflection

This weekend we journey back to the Last Supper and Jesus gives us the beautiful and powerful image of the *Vine and the Branches*. This famous Gospel passage contains one of the great I AM statements, as Jesus proclaims, “I Am the Vine, and you are the branches.” I Am, *ego emie* in Greek and *ehyeh aser ehyeh* in Hebrew, echoes Exodus 3:14 as God reveals Himself to Moses as the one whose nature it is to be. The Jewish people who first heard those words, knew that Jesus was clearly stating that He is Being itself, i.e. God. He is the one whose very nature it is to be. He is the author of life, the source, and the ground of all being. In this beautiful metaphor Jesus is assuring us that if we remain connected to Him as a branch on a vine then we will share in His life, and because He is life, this life is eternal.

I must confess that for most of my life I looked at this metaphor a certain way, in a way that I now know is wrong. I was picturing Jesus as the stem of the vine and us attached as a branch is attached to the trunk of a tree. One day sitting in a seminary class listening to an esteemed scripture scholar I was corrected. He seemed to look right at me as he said, “please know that the underlying Aramaic and then Greek word that Jesus used for “vine” includes the entire plant, roots, stem, branches, leaves, fruit, etc. So, when Jesus says, ‘I Am the vine, and you are the branches’ he is stating profoundly that we must become a part of Him.” By remaining connected to Him we become His body.

Imagine that you are a branch on a vine. Think back to your 8th grade science class. A branch, connected to the stem of the plant, draws water and nutrients from the soil through its roots, up the stem, into the branches, and then into the leaves and the fruit. If a branch were cut off from the vine it would surely die. If all but one of the branches were cut off the entire plant would die. One branch by itself would not have the strength to draw the necessary water and nutrients from the soil to live. Pulling together the branches on a vine draw sufficient water and nourishment from the soil not only to live but to bear fruit, fruit that will last. Jesus gives us a powerful image of what it means to be the Body of Christ, a community of faith.

As a pastor I experienced every day the power of a faith community working together as branches on a vine. The fruit of all of us working together was visible for all to see. I have been overwhelmed by the amazing Spirit of every parish community that I have been privileged to serve. They were all truly like branches on a vine, and that vine was Jesus Himself.

As a parish community we gather at Mass to become what we receive at the altar, the Body of Christ. It is important that we do not come to just to receive, but to enter into the Mystery that we receive. To abide with Christ, we must enter into Him. Connected to the source of life and love and to each other we will bear the fruit of Christ’s abiding love in our families, our communities and in our world. And so, we pray, come Holy Spirit fill the hearts of us Your faithful and enkindle in us the fire of Your love. Amen.

Yours in Jesus and the Holy Spirit,



Personal Witness

I grew up in a farming community, and so the agricultural images that Jesus uses often in his parables and metaphors have always been very alive to me. Due to our colder climate, we do not have any grape vines, and wine presses; so some of that imagery is left to the imagination. We are blest with bountiful berry vines, such as raspberry and blackberry, that are very similar to grape vines, however.

My mother grew up on a dairy farm that supported a family of ten children of which she was the only girl. She and her mother oversaw a large vegetable garden that supplied the family year around. Although grandpa and the boys did some of the heavy work, the girls were in charge. That gardening knowledge was passed down to our family of six children and to this day my mother remains the foreman of the gardening operation on the family homestead.

She once was the architect of a bountiful raspberry patch that she cared for with her own hands. The harvest of large, beautiful raspberries lasted from mid summer into early fall. Mother knew how and when to prune the vines such that they produced the greatest harvest. She also knew which vines to prune and which to leave on the vine.

Several years ago, we lost the beautiful raspberry patch. Mother became gravely ill one summer and spent several weeks in the hospital. With caring for her we too were not able to attend the garden. The raspberry patch went untended for the entire spring and summer. The fact is that no one in the family could care for the raspberry vines as she could. Her personal, hands on experience over many years gave her the instincts to properly care for the vines. It was something that she was not able to communicate to us. It was something that we would have to learn for ourselves. It was too late, and the raspberries became as wild berries and eventually we lost the entire patch.

The vine is a beautiful metaphor of the spiritual life. Each one of us must make the personal choice to remain connected to vine that is Christ. He is the source of all life and of all love. As branches on that vine, we must learn to pull together to draw the life and love of God into the communities of our families, our parishes and into society in general. This is the fruit that Jesus is talking about. It is the fruit of love. It takes more than one branch on a vine for a vine to survive. Together we must become one in Christ and bear fruit for the world.

We must also come to learn what in our lives needs pruning and when that trimming needs to occur. Are there areas of sin in our lives that need pruning? Are there wrongful thoughts and ideologies that are keeping us from remaining on the True Vine? As a fallen people, affected by original sin and personal and societal sin, we need the light of Christ to illumine our hearts and souls and minds. Only in the light of Christ can we see and come to know what needs pruning in our lives. Abiding in Christ involves a mutual reciprocity of love and life. It describes a deep abiding love relationship with Jesus. All of John's Gospel proclaims eternal life that flows from this personal abiding relationship.

Fr. Glenn