

Third Sunday of Easter – A Cycle

May 4, 2014

INTRODUCTION: In our first reading we hear Peter's first sermon – the one he gave on that first Pentecost. This is the same Peter who just a few weeks prior to this speech denied he even knew Jesus. Now, filled with the Spirit of God that had just been sent upon the disciples, he speaks out boldly about Jesus - that God raised our Lord back to life after he had been put to death and that Jesus is now exalted at God's right hand as Messiah and Savior.

HOMILY: Did you ever feel really, really discouraged? Maybe you wanted to walk away from Church and never come back because you felt as if God let you down. Or you wanted to run away from home because of angry words or a member of your family was really mean to you. Maybe you decided you were going to quit your job or quit school because you felt you were treated so unfairly. We've all had those experiences. Maybe we have actually walked away. Wouldn't it be interesting if a stranger started walking along with you, gave you a chance to talk about what you were feeling, and then explained why things happened as they did? You begin to see things more clearly. You invite the stranger to stop along the way for something to eat. Bread usually shows up on the table first; the stranger takes the bread, says a blessing, breaks the bread, then hands you a piece. Suddenly you realize it is Jesus you are talking to. He smiles and then disappears. He doesn't say goodbye, he doesn't get up and leave. It's as if he is still there but he can no longer be seen.

In today's gospel St. Luke tells us of two disciples who had put all their hopes in Jesus and when Jesus was put to death, they thought it was all torn away from them. They had heard that Jesus had risen, but they didn't believe it. Jesus' conversation with them and the breaking of the bread made them realize Jesus really was alive; their hopes returned.

Can you imagine anything like this happening to yourself or to anyone else? St. Luke, in today's gospel, is telling us it happens all the time, especially when we come to Mass. Jesus does not desert us in our disappointments and discouragements. "I am with you always," he told his disciples before he ascended to the Father. But we do not recognize him. He might come as a stranger; he might speak to us through a book we're reading or through a friend or just in the quiet of our hearts. He especially speaks to us through his Word in the Scriptures. He nourishes us and blesses us in many ways. Too frequently we forget about the many ways he blesses us because all we can think about are the things that worry us or bother us. Especially he nourishes us in the Eucharist. We do not know whether Jesus celebrated a Eucharist for these two disciples when they sat down at a table to eat – but St. Luke wants us to think of the gift of the Eucharist when he describes what Jesus did as he sat at table with the two disciples. Notice the words: "he took bread, said the blessing, broke it and gave it to them." It is the exact same way St. Luke described what Jesus did at the Last Supper when he changed bread and wine into his own body and blood.

Today we have four of our second graders who are making their first Communion. We congratulate them and their parents as they move forward in their journey to grow closer to our Lord. May we meet our Lord each week in the Eucharist and grow in our love for him. And may we always know that the Lord is with us, helping us along life's path. Even though we do not see him, he assured us he is with us and we believe in him.

Fourth Sunday of Easter – A Cycle

May 11, 2014

INTRODUCTION: (*Acts 2, 14a.36-41; 1 Peter 2, 20b-25; John 10, 1-10*) Pentecost is the setting for our first reading. After the Holy Spirit came down upon Jesus' first followers, the Apostles left the upper room where they were gathered and started speaking in a variety of languages so that people from all over the Mediterranean world, who were in Jerusalem that day, could understand them in their native language. For those who were wondering what was going on, Peter gave an explanation. Today's reading is the conclusion of Peter's sermon. He proclaims Jesus is Lord and Christ; i.e., as Lord, Jesus is divine and as Christ, Jesus is the Messiah, the savior of God's people. In the second reading from the first letter of Peter, the saving mission of Jesus is proclaimed, so that we, like lost sheep, could be brought back to God.

HOMILY: Happy Mother's Day to all mothers and to those who fill in as mothers in helping children to become mature adults. I apologize for an excess of humor today. It will make up for the times when I couldn't find a good joke. A clever writer, in writing about mothers, proposed the idea that mothers are the same the world over. And to support this assertion, she speculated that mothers of famous people would probably have said the same thing to their children that mothers do today. Such as: PAUL REVERE'S MOTHER: "I don't care where you think you have to go, young man, midnight is past your curfew." MONA LISA'S MOTHER: "After all that money your father and I spent on braces, that's the biggest smile you can give us?" COLUMBUS' MOTHER: "I don't care what you've discovered, you still could have written." MICHELANGELO'S MOTHER: "Can't you paint on walls like other children? Do you have any idea how hard it is to get that stuff off the ceiling?" NAPOLEON'S MOTHER: "All right, if you aren't hiding your report card inside your jacket, take you hand out of there and show me." ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S MOTHER: "What's with the stovepipe hat? Can't you just wear a baseball cap like the other kids?" ALBERT EINSTEIN'S MOTHER: "But it's your senior picture. Can't you do something about your hair?" GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOTHER: "The next time I catch you throwing money across the Potomac, you can kiss your allowance goodbye." JONAH'S MOTHER: "That's an interesting story. Now tell me where you've *really* been for the last three days." THOMAS EDISON'S MOTHER: "Of course I'm proud that you invented the electric light bulb. Now turn it off and get to bed." (*The Joyful Noiseletter, Dec. 2002, pg 1*)

I know you came here for something more than entertainment, even though humor is good for one's spirit. You have come to be strengthened and guided and loved by the strength and wisdom contained only in the power of God's word. But before we get to

today's scriptures, on this Mother's Day we cannot forget to say a prayer to Mary, God's Mother and our Mother. We had our May crowning on Friday and we left the statue of Mary here to remind us that Mary will always be our Mother who deserves our honor and who will hear our prayers.

In today's gospel, we hear Jesus talking to us about shepherds. He uses very simple examples that his hearers would understand. Sheep were a major part of Israel's economy and they still are. The examples Jesus uses are easy enough for us to understand even if we've never been any closer to sheep than having to put on a woolen sweater on a cold day. Jesus approaches the ideas he wants to communicate from several aspects. Today's first parable compares Jesus to the shepherd whose voice the sheep recognize and whom they follow. Each of us is important to him as he tells us the shepherd calls each by name. The image sort of reminds us of the one lost sheep out of a flock of 100 and the shepherd leaves the 99 in the wilderness to go looking for his lost sheep. (Luke 15, 3-7) He loves each of us personally and he calls us to follow him. In the second part of today's reading, Jesus compares himself to the gate into the sheepfold. Others have tried to get in, such as some of the Jewish leaders, but they unfortunately were motivated by power and pride. Jesus' way is the only way – as he said at the Last Supper: "I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14,6)

The most important verse for me in today's reading goes like this: Jesus said: "I came so that they might have life and have it abundantly." (John 10,10) We all experience losses and disappointments in this life, no matter who we are, rich or poor, young or old. We seek to find fulfillment; sometimes we succeed; sometimes we do not. Here in this verse, Jesus gives us the promise of the fullness of life. Just knowing ourselves to be one with him introduces us to that more abundant life. In the end, what God has planned for us is beyond our comprehension. From what I've read about people who have had a near-death experience and who find themselves lifted into heaven's glory, they usually do not want to come back to this life. After that experience they no longer are afraid to die - especially as life goes on and we lose friends, physical and mental abilities, and many things we took for granted in our youth. We have to keep remembering Jesus is our life, that he is the way and the truth and the life. Amen.

Fifth Sunday of Easter – A Cycle

May 18, 2014

INTRODUCTION – (Acts 6, 1-7; I Peter 2, 4-9; John 14, 1-12)

Three weeks ago we heard St. Luke tell us in the Acts of the Apostles how the first Christians got along so harmoniously. Luke tells us they devoted themselves to prayer and instruction from the Apostles and generously shared their material possessions so that no one was in need among them. As the community of believers grew, so did the problems. The very first believers in Jesus were Jews from around Jerusalem who spoke Hebrew or Aramaic. Soon Jews from other countries around the Mediterranean came to believe in Jesus. Like good Jews,

they would come back to Jerusalem from time to time. For the most part they spoke Greek, the common language of the Roman Empire. They tended to be more partial to Greek customs and ideas than the Jerusalem Jews. Because they spoke Greek, they were called Hellenists. When the Hellenists came to Jerusalem, they felt as if they were being treated like second-class citizens, especially when food was being handed out. Remember, in those days widows were entirely dependent on the community for their basic needs (sort of a welfare system). The Hellenists complained that their widows were being overlooked and not getting their fair share. The Apostles felt their role was not to distribute food but to stay focused on prayer and preaching. They solved the problem by creating a new office in the Church, the diaconate. I am so grateful the Apostles did that then and that the Second Vatican Council has restored the permanent diaconate. Wherever I've been, I've always had great deacons to help in the ministry of the parish.

HOMILY - I want to start with a story. The story goes that after the Spirit came on Pentecost, the Apostles divided up the different regions of the world, and by chance, Thomas was chosen to go to India. Although he didn't want to go, Jesus appeared and persuaded him to go. Thomas had been a carpenter in his younger years. When he got to India, he met the king who was intent on building a palace for himself. Thomas discussed the project with the king and the king was convinced Thomas would do a great job of building a beautiful palace. So the king gave Thomas a large sum of money and went on a trip. Thomas took all the money and gave it to the poor and never started building the palace. After a while the king sent a messenger to ask Thomas how the palace was going and Thomas said it was coming along fine. He just needed some more money for the roof. So the king sent more money and Thomas again gave it all to the poor and did not even start on the palace. Shortly thereafter, the king figured the palace must be almost finished, and being eager to see it, decided to come back home. When the king found out Thomas had given away all the money the king had given him and had done nothing on the palace, he had Thomas arrested and decided to have him put to death. It just so happened, while Thomas was in prison, the king's brother, Gad, dies. Gad's spirit was taken to heaven and an angel showed Gad a number of wonderful mansions he could choose from for his eternal dwelling place. As Gad was considering which mansion to choose, he saw an exceptionally beautiful mansion on a lovely estate and decided he wanted that one. The angel said "no," that particular mansion was the palace Thomas has been building for the king. All the good works Thomas did with the king's money which was distributed to the poor went into building that wonderful mansion. Gad said he had to tell his brother, the king, before the king put Thomas to death. So Gad was allowed to return to earth for a short time to tell his brother, the king, about the mansion in heaven. Gad promised his brother a blessed afterlife if he became a follower of Jesus, which he did. My story comes from a writing called the *Acts of Thomas* that goes back to about 100 years after the time of the Apostles. The story is imaginative and non-historical - more like a parable.

When I reflected on today's gospel, the image of a beautiful palace or mansion kept coming to me. Jesus said: "in my Father's house there are many dwelling places...I am going off to prepare a place for you." Jesus' words are very comforting when we think

of death, whether it is our own or the death of someone we love. Today's gospel comes from Jesus' discourse at the Last Supper. He knew how traumatic it would be for his Apostles when he was put to death and he told them not to let their hearts be troubled. That would be almost an impossible challenge for them, but Jesus gives them the means by which they could avoid great distress: he said have faith. "You have faith in God, have faith also in me."

Jesus said he is going to prepare a place, but we must not forget we are preparing the place, too, by our good works. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few." (Mt. 7,13-14) Also, the Book of Revelation reminds us that when we leave this world our "good deeds go with" us. (Rev.14,13) Our gospel reminds us that at present we are living in two worlds. We have our everyday world of keeping a roof over our head and putting food on the table, and we have a world which we hope to be part of forever, a world where Jesus (together with us) is building a place for us to be able to enjoy our heavenly Father, his presence and his love, and the love of all our brothers and sisters, for all eternity. Amen.

Sixth Sunday of Easter – A Cycle

May 25, 2014

INTRODUCTION: (*Acts, 8,5-8.14-17; I Peter 3,15-18; John 14,15-21*)

St. Luke's *Acts of the Apostles* tells us how the message of Christ spread throughout the Mediterranean world, starting at Jerusalem. The power behind this growth was the Holy Spirit and the risen (yet invisible) presence of our Lord. As the ministry grew, the Apostolic leaders needed more helpers and so last week we heard how they chose seven other men who were ordained to serve, men we now call deacons. Initially they helped with the daily distribution of food to the poor and widows, but it wasn't long before they were preaching the gospel of Christ. The first martyr was one of these seven, St. Steven. He spoke with such power that the enemies of Christ could not debate with him; they could only destroy him. Another one of the deacons, Philip, whose name we hear in today's first reading, was the first to announce the good news of the resurrection of Jesus in Samaria. The Samaritans were hostile to the Jews and vice versa, but the gospel was well received there. The Apostles 'confirm' the ministry of Philip with an even greater outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

HOMILY

Tom figured out a way to remember his wife's birthday and their wedding anniversary. He opened an account with a florist and told him to send flowers to his wife on those dates, along with a note signed, "Your loving husband." His wife was thrilled by the attention, and all was great until one anniversary, Tom came home, saw the bouquet, kissed his wife, and said, "Nice flowers. Where'd you get them?" You can't put love on cruise control or automatic pilot. Relationships take an ongoing involvement of ourselves, even in our relationship with God.

In the Garden of Eden, Eve asks Adam: "Do you love me?" Adam answers: "Of course, Eve! You're my one and only love." Adam was smart enough to give the right answer. With God we're often tempted to let other things take a higher priority in our lives than God, such things as sports, pleasure, money, our own ego, etc. *(both jokes from Reader's Digest, Laughter Really Is the Best Medicine, pg 62 and 81)*

In today's very short gospel reading Jesus uses the word "love" five times. In our culture today that word "love" conjures up images of romantic love. Now romantic love is good. Without it the human race would have become extinct a long time ago. But in our culture it's overdone; it's the kind of love that's most written about, portrayed in movies and soap operas, etc. Sometimes people feel their religion is not satisfying them because when they pray or when they hear Jesus teach us we should love God, they say I don't feel anything, I don't feel close to God, I don't feel thrilled to go to Mass on Sunday. I don't know what's wrong with me. What's wrong is they are thinking in the context of romantic love. When Jesus speaks of love he has a different meaning. He is not speaking of the kind of love that our modern day culti Greek, and in Greek, there are three different words for love. There is a word for romantic love (eros) and a word for friendship love (philia) and a third word, one used most often in the Scriptures, is agape which means esteem, affection, a giving and caring kind of interest in another.

When Jesus speaks of love in today's passage, he is speaking of agape love. It is characterized not so much by the kind of feelings it gives us, which are sometimes warm and affectionate, full of gratitude and peace, having a sense of God's presence, but sometimes our feelings are feelings of doubt, darkness, emptiness, which are experiences even saints have. We can't measure our love for God by our feelings. But Jesus does give us a way of knowing whether we love God:" If you love me you will keep my commandments," he tells us. This is a reality that is true in all our relationships. When we love others with an agape love, we are willing to go out of our way for them, be concerned about them, spend time with them; if they need our help we're willing to help. We even treat our pets this way; we care about them and care for them.

Today's gospel setting is at the Last Supper. Jesus is preparing to leave his apostles, but he asks for their continued love even though he would no longer be visible to them. He is not deserting them; he is not leaving them orphans. The Holy Spirit will be with them; the Holy Spirit will allow them to know that This love is conditioned, not on God's part, for God always loves us, but it is conditioned on our part, for if we say we love God but are not keeping his commandments, we are placing ourselves at a distance from God and from the true love for God, agape love, which will lead us to a peace and joy we will never know in this world, and it will be forever. Amen.