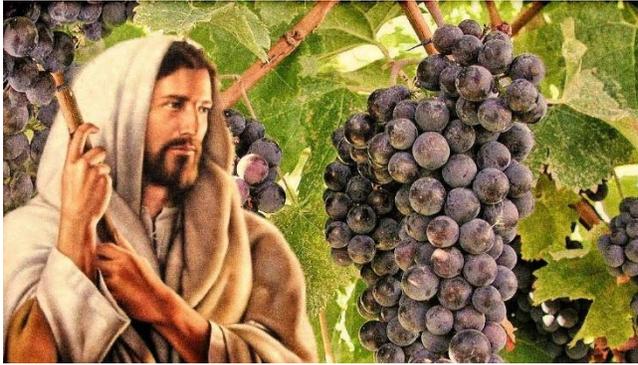


Homily for May 2, 2021 – 5th Sunday of Easter



Faith is a very precarious thing isn't it? The moment you think you have it, something will happen this very day to make you doubt that you had it at all. But don't get discouraged because these scripture readings are telling you that you probably have more faith than you know and moreover, you

never lose it entirely. Like learning how to ride a bicycle, you never lose it. Your faith will be tried and tested, no doubt. It will be challenged. It will have its dry and uninspiring moments. There will even be times where you will want to give up altogether. Yet, St. Paul tells us that when all else fails and falls away and appears to be dead, three things will remain: faith, hope, and love. A good idea of what faith is comes from that second reading where John says, ***“And this is (God’s) commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another.”*** If you believe and you love, you are person of faith. As a mathematical equation, it looks like this: belief + love = faith. You have to have love in the equation, otherwise beliefs alone, as history keeps showing us, can be used to justify violence against others who don't believe the same things we believe. Love, as well, has to be concrete (loving this particular person in their particular situation) otherwise love becomes an abstraction of the mind, and, as they say, “the rubber never hits the road.”

St. Paul warns us beliefs that remain in the head and are never connected to concrete love produces an empty faith. I'm just not sure in the world of faith which comes first. Do we believe something so much that it moves us to becoming more loving? Or, do we just go ahead and love people and through loving them our faith becomes stronger? St. John would say, “It doesn't matter. Just believe in Jesus and love others and you will abide in God and God will abide in you.”

The word abide means to remain or to stay. Notice, according to John, you are already in God. The trick is not to figure out how get connected to God, you already are connected to God. The trick is to remain, to stay, to abide in God who is already connected to you and nurturing you in ways you are hardly aware of. Live, and

move at the world, from that deep place of connectedness, that you already have with God.

Jesus is saying the same thing is he not? When he is talking about the vine and the branches he says, ***“Abide in me (ah, there’s that same word) as I abide in you.”*** When you know that you are already connected, your life will bear fruit. How could it not? If you know you are connected to eternal life how could that eternal life not flow through you and bear good fruit in the world? Jesus saw and acknowledged that connectedness in everyone he encountered even when people did not see it in themselves. I think it’s linked to the way Jesus often addresses his disciples and a lot of other grown adults. He calls them *children*, of all things.

The second reading from St. John is addressed to adults and starts with, ***“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”*** A quote from Brennan Manning that might be helpful. In his book, The Ragamuffin Gospel, he writes: ***“The gentleness of Jesus with sinners flowed from his ability to read their hearts. Behind people’s grumpiest poses and most puzzling defense mechanisms, behind their arrogance and airs, behind their silence, sneers, and causes, Jesus saw little children who hadn’t been loved enough and who had ceased growing because someone had ceased believing in them. His extraordinary sensitivity caused Jesus to speak of the faithful as children, no matter how tall, rich, clever, and successful they might be.”***

Jesus sees us and loves things in us that we temporarily lose access to. Most of the time we do not believe nor live from the deep truth that we are branches connected to the one vine and so we remain children. But when we do realize it, we begin to grow spiritually as adults.

In the 25 years since I moved to the Maritimes, I can’t believe how many vineyards have popped up. People are making a living growing grape vines in places, just a generation ago, would have been unthinkable. One thing I’ve recently learned is that looking at a tree, the trunk is clearly distinguishable from the limbs. But that is not so with grape vines. Jesus would have been referring to grape vines. With grape vines, the vine and the branches are virtually indistinguishable. Perhaps that’s why Jesus uses this analogy. He sees a continual flow, a continually abiding of branch and vine. We, in our limited sight, see breaks between us and God and wonder how

we are going to patch things up from our side. We see interrupting breaks; Jesus sees a flow.

A final story about connectedness. About five years ago I remember reading about a priest from United States who was, until recently, the chair of a wonderful charitable association (The Catholic Near East Welfare Association). While visiting Egypt, one of the places where the charity was operating, and Egypt being where Christians continue to experience persecution, he meets up with an Egyptian priest. (Egyptian Christians tend to be Coptic Christians rather than Roman Catholic Christians). The American priest, walking alongside this Coptic priest writes the following: ***In the middle of our conversation, a group of beautiful children came up to me, obviously not used to having a visitor from a foreign land. I noticed on the wrist of the children a tattoo of the Coptic cross. I asked each of them to show me their tattoo in more detail. They were proud of this insignia of their faith. Though small, these crosses given at baptism are cherished for life. Then the elder priest in our group pulled back the sleeve of his cassock and showed me his cross—much larger, a bit faded, but still distinct as a Coptic cross. The children were very attentive. Then he said something very profound: “As we age, our skin stretches and the cross grows larger.”***

Unlike the Coptic Christians, we do not put a permanent tattoo on our newly baptized, but the Cross, nevertheless, remain a sign for us throughout our entire lifetime that we are the branches connected to the one vine, Jesus, and from him we draw our life.

Fr. Phil