

Sermon: Easter 6

Mr. Kevin Barry

May 10, 2015

Year B
Acts 10:44-48
Psalm 98
1 John 5:1-6
John 15:9-17

I should probably start out today by wishing everyone a HAPPY ROGATION SUNDAY!!
Not the greeting you were expecting today, huh?

I realize that Rogation Sunday and the 3 Rogation Days of Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday this week that lead up to Thursday's Ascension Day, which we will observe next Sunday in our readings, are more of a rural Episcopal/Anglican tradition in a formerly agrarian society, where farms, lands, and their laborers were blessed, often with elaborate processions. But I would like to take this opportunity, particularly in view of our Gospel reading of vines and fruits, to offer up a prayer for our glorious Refugee Community Garden, as well as the feeding fields throughout the Earth. Please join me:

Almighty God, Lord of Heaven and Earth,
we humbly pray that your gracious providence
may give and preserve to our use
the fruitfulness of the land and the seas;
and may prosper all who labor therein,
that we, who are constantly receiving good things
from your hand, may always give you thanks,
through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.

There is almost a springtime theme woven in today's readings by those who take a little more, let's call it, "expansive" view. Just think about it -

The 1st and 2nd verses of Psalm 98 have probably been voiced at one time or another by our resident baseball fans when referring to celebrated right-handed major league pitchers like Jack Morris, Bob Gibson, and Justin Verlander.

The Acts verses are the very first documented occurrence of the gift of the Holy Spirit being bestowed upon Gentiles.

The Gospel reading's "Jesus the True Vine" verses. But for me 2 words kept sweeping through my mind after my first examination of today's readings: Love ---- and ----
Abide.

So I would like to concentrate on the two Johannine readings that are typically attributed by scholars to be by the same author, or at least the author of the First Epistle of John assumes that readers have knowledge of the Gospel of John.

I am certain that many preaching around the world today have found a cutesy way of incorporating the lyrics of The Beatles classic song “All You Need Is Love” into their sermons. A song that opens with “Love” repeated 9 times – and 75 times overall. And, truly, the title of the song says all that needs to be said.

I am also certain that even more homilies are diving into the various definitions of “abide” and how they should be interpreted (or, not interpreted). I would like to keep this simple for our purposes. Basically abide means to stay or remain. You will see that Jesus does a fine job himself of using the word in an understandable way in the 4th verse I will be reading from earlier in the Gospel chapter.

Our Gospel reading today is the second half of the “True Vine” lesson that Jesus is disseminating to the Disciples in what some have termed to be his “farewell,” preparing his friends for a future without him physically leading the way. I think it is imperative that we take a look back at the first 8 verses of this chapter because, as Presbyterian minister Meda Stamper so eloquently has written, “The vine can only be understood in light of its definition as an abiding in love, and the fruitfulness of this love, as described in John 15:16, only makes sense in light of the vine.”

The 15th Chapter of John begins: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

This week's Gospel reading then continues on with: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

So many of us Christians fret over what we need to do to earn and then keep God's love, coming up with all manner of "Good Works," public and private confessions, and even misguided financial inducements. Instead, for what I think is the best way to sum things up, I would like to turn one more time to the Reverend Doctor Stamper and the Rogation Sunday/Spring theme. The Good News is "We merely choose to abide in the love that has drawn us in, and then we blossom."

Former members of the Church at Ephesus had stopped believing Jesus was indeed the Messiah. One of the results of this unrest in Asia Minor was the letter we know as the First Epistle of John that was written to those believers who stayed with the church. Our reading from its 5th chapter expands the commandment to love one another as Christ had loved his friends.

The fact that today is not only Rogation Sunday, but, of course, is also Mother's Day, can help us understand what can be an overwhelming concept that everyone who believes Jesus is the Christ should love everyone else who believes. The apt analogy would be within our own families as our family trees are continually branching out. When a loved family member adds a child to the brood, do we make a conscious decision whether or not we will also love the child? Of course we don't! We do so instinctually. John has essentially taken this familial instinct and broadened it to what has now become billions. Yes, that's billions with a "b."

The month of May has always been a special, though hectic, month for my wife, Jill, and I. It is also always a reminder and testament to this whole Christian love commandment

ideal. Jill and I both moved from different places for different reasons to Madison, Wisconsin back in 1990. Neither of us could of imagined at that time that less than 5 years later on Sunday, May 14, 1995, we would be celebrating both a first wedding anniversary and first Mother's Day with our child, unconditionally in love with a spouse, a child, and new extended families and friends spread out across the country. When I have times where I am questioning my own faith, our May days (which also include my birthday next week) impress upon the non-logical machinations in my brain and help me to recall all the "coincidences" where indeed the hand of God has been evident in our life journey together and with our daughters, Kate, Meg, and Beth. I never have questioned any of my love for them as a wife, daughters, and people, nor have I ever questioned any of their love for me as a husband, father, and person. John is telling me, and all of us, that this should be extrapolated out to God, Jesus, and persons all around the world, 99.99% of whom we will never meet.

Remember my earlier comment about how certain I am that many preaching around the world today have found a cutesy way of incorporating the lyrics of The Beatles classic song "All You Need Is Love" into their sermon? One reason for that certainty is that I too originally was going to conclude that way.

Instead, today, on one of our 2nd Sundays of the month when we are worshipping with alternative music selections, I would like to finish with the fitting first few lines of "Who Am I" by the contemporary Christian rock band Casting Crowns:

Who am I, that the Lord of all the earth
Would care to know my name
Would care to feel my hurt
Who am I, that the Bright and Morning Star
Would choose to light the way
For my ever wandering heart

Not because of who I am
But because of what You've done
Not because of what I've done
But because of who You are.

AMEN!