

Already it has been four weeks since Easter Sunday. We have two more Sundays in the Easter season plus Ascension Thursday, a holy day of “obligation”—which means even though it is not the weekend, you are supposed to go to church (whenever you are not preoccupied by a pandemic)—and then Pentecost. What is important about Pentecost Sunday is that it is the day we celebrate when the disciples received the Holy Spirit as tongues of fire, the first confirmation, so to speak, and the topic of a whole different discussion in a few weeks.

Today’s first reading again (because it is Easter season) is from the Acts of the Apostles and is about Saul. Saul (to the people of Jerusalem), also known as Paul (the Roman form of his name), traveled all over the ancient world preaching about Jesus. Saul had been a Jewish Pharisee and persecutor of Christians. Persecution means cruel or harmful treatment because of one’s belief. So not-yet Paul, Saul the Pharisee, the persecutor, was on his way to arrest some more new Christians, when he was knocked off his horse just outside of Damascus and blinded by a bright light. Then he heard Jesus’ voice say, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul was led into Damascus blind, dazed, and confused. Three days later his sight was restored after a disciple named Ananias was told by Jesus in a dream to lay his hands on Saul. His sight was returned, and he was baptized by Ananias. Then Saul began to preach about Jesus in Damascus for what may have been as long as three years until some of the Jews tried to have him killed. But he escaped to Jerusalem. And now you are caught up to today’s reading.

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 9:26-28, 31)

When Saul arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to join the followers. But they were all afraid of him, because they did not believe he was a

true follower. ¶ Then Barnabas helped him by bringing him to the apostles. He explained how on the road to Damascus, Saul had seen the Lord and how the Lord had spoken to Saul. Barnabas also said that when Saul was in Damascus, he had spoken bravely in the name of Jesus. ¶ Saul moved about freely with the followers in Jerusalem and told everyone about the Lord. ¶ The church throughout all of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria was at peace. It was growing with the help of the Holy Spirit. ¶ The Word of the Lord.

Now everybody in Jerusalem did not know yet that Saul got knocked off his horse and spoke with Jesus. They just remembered him as the persecutor. Once he returned to Jerusalem, it is not hard to understand that the apostles and the Christians were worried about this fellow who not so long ago had been rounding them all up and sending them to prison just because they believed in Jesus. But Barnabas came to Saul's aid. Barnabas also had another name, Joseph (you know, like Saul/Paul, Simon/Peter, or someone you might know with a nickname), and he was also Mark's cousin (remember Matthew, Mark, Luke, & John who wrote the gospels? Right, that Mark). What happened is that Barnabas/Joseph/Mark's cousin brought Saul/Paul to Simon/Peter and the apostles/disciples, telling them all about how Saul/Paul fell/was knocked off his horse in the vicinity of/outside of Damascus, after which he preached all around the town/throughout the city about Jesus, the crucified/risen Christ/Messiah.

Little by little the Christian community began to realize how Paul was the real deal. Do you know the expressions talk the talk and *walk the walk* and what the difference is? Well, Paul didn't just say he loved Jesus. He was frequently speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. So Paul shows us that he had the courage to change from persecutor of Jesus to preacher of Jesus, even though preaching kept getting him into dangerous trouble. Paul definitely *walked the walk*.

## Responsorial Psalm (Psalm 22:27, 30-31)

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

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

Everyone on this earth will remember you, Lord. People all over the world will turn and worship you.

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

In the future, everyone will worship and learn about you, our Lord. People not yet born will told, "The Lord has saved us!"

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

...which is exactly what Paul was doing in Damascus and Jerusalem. Praising Jesus in front of other people takes courage. Paul had it. We should have it, too.

Today's second reading and gospel, like last week, both come from St. John. John was the only apostle who died of natural causes. Even though he was thrown into boiling oil, he was not harmed and lived to be an old man. Love was one of the main themes of his writings. He was always saying, "Children (remember last week, we are children of God), love one another. This is what the Lord commands; if we do this, nothing else is necessary."

Today's reading is not long, so pay attention or you might miss it.

A reading from the first book of St. John (1 John 3:18)

Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. ¶ The word of the Lord.

So in this one sentence of St. John's reading, he talks about two different kinds of love, love "with words or speech," and love "with actions and in truth." Let's suppose you have a classmate and you two are close friends, BFFs. Suppose you are with some other classmates. If these other people say bad things about your friend when your friend isn't around and you don't stick up for him or her, is that love "with words or speech" or love "with actions and in truth?" Isn't standing up for your friend or standing up in the temple and speaking boldly about Jesus—like Paul did over and over, even though it was risky and could get him in real big trouble—just what we mean when we talk about love "with actions and in truth?" With Jesus, we need to do more than just talk the talk "with words or speech." We need to *walk the walk* "with actions and in truth." In other words, don't just say you love Jesus. Show it!

For today's gospel you need to imagine a tree or a vine. If you break off a branch, soon enough it withers and dies. A branch cannot live and produce leaves and fruit unless it is nourished by the tree or vine or plant to which it is attached. Today Jesus compares Himself to a vine and us to the branches which bear the fruit of His love.

A reading from the holy gospel according to St. John (John 15: 1-5, 7-8)

Jesus said to his disciples: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts away every branch of mine that does not produce fruit. But He trims clean every branch that does produce fruit, so that it will produce even more fruit. ¶ "You are already clean because of what I have said to you. ¶ "Stay joined to me, and I will stay joined to you. Just as a branch cannot produce fruit

unless it stays joined to the vine, you cannot produce fruit unless you stay joined to me. ¶ “I am the vine, and you are the branches. If you stay joined to Me, and I stay joined to you, then you will produce lots of fruit. But you cannot do anything without Me. ¶ “Stay joined to me and let my teachings become part of you. Then you can pray for whatever you want, and your prayer will be answered. ¶ “When you become fruitful disciples of mine, My father will be honored.” ¶ The gospel of the Lord.

A gardener or vine grower makes sure plants are healthy and strong, pruning away dead, damaged, or weak branches. So let's get this straight. The gardener or vine grower, according to Jesus in today's gospel, is God, our Father. And Jesus is the vine. And that means we are the branches. We are a part of Jesus. He is working in our lives, in our thoughts, in our actions, in our words. By being kind, loving, forgiving, honest, generous, the fruits of His love are there for all to see. Jesus calls himself the “true vine.” Jesus calls us his branches because He supports us, like a tree supports its branches. He wants us to bear Him fruit. What Jesus means is that He wants us to follow His teachings and love our neighbor “with actions and in truth.” By doing this it will be like bearing fruit for His vine, because we will be sharing His love with others. We will stand up and *show* the world that we love Jesus, “with actions and in truth”, not just “with words or speech.” *Walk the walk*, don't just talk the talk. St. John said it. The psalm described it. St. Paul did it. And if you do it, you will bear fruit on Jesus' branches, which is what God wants us to do. *Walk the walk* and *show* others that you love Jesus “with actions and in truth.”

And that, boys and girls, is the lesson in today's readings.

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