

Fifth Sunday of Easter (B)

May 6, 2012

We heard today the story of the man in the First Reading who could not be trusted. He was Saul (later named Paul), who once was in charge of a terrorist squad that rounded up Christians and stoned them to death. On his way to Damascus on a round-up mission, Saul was struck blind by the risen Lord, who told him that when he persecuted the Christians he actually was persecuting Christ. In other words, when you strike the branches you strike the vine. After his baptism in Damascus, Saul traveled to Jerusalem to join the disciples there, and that's where today's story begins.

But, as we heard, Saul had a hard time convincing the disciples that his life had changed and that the man who had once persecuted Christians now was a Christian himself. They were afraid of him and refused to believe that he was a disciple. But, thank God, the man Barnabas stepped forward. The name Barnabas means "son of encouragement." Barnabas convinced the disciples that Saul was indeed a true convert to the faith.

The story has a beautiful ending: Saul walking arm in arm with the disciples, preaching the Gospel not on his own but as a new branch on the vine of the church of Jesus, the disciples no longer afraid of Saul but actually smuggling him out of town when some of the Hellenists tried to kill him for preaching the Gospel. That's how the church was at peace and grew in the Lord. It was not a church whose branches were growing on their own, working on their own, but growing instead like the vine Jesus spoke about.

When Jesus spoke about how his disciples would remain in him he used a familiar image, one that his followers would recognize. The vine grew, and still does, all over the Holy Land. It's a plant that needs much attention if it is to bear fruit. The vine bears two kinds of branches, one that bears fruit and one that does not. The branches that don't bear fruit have to be drastically pruned back so that they won't sap away any of the plant's strength.

In his farewell address Jesus reminded his followers that the only possible way for us to live our lives is when we abide in him, the true vine. Apart from the vine of the risen Lord, we may grow wild, but we will not bear fruit. "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."

The fool in the Bible has always been the one who thinks that he or she can live life unconnected. The fool has no need for a vine, a connectedness with a community, a world, a God. The fool believes that he or she is the vine, not a branch to something larger in life. The fool forgets that the Lord is the vine and we are the branches.

Psychologists have said correctly that the greatest pain that we suffer from in our "me" generation is the pain of loneliness. We think that we can live life unconnected. We think that we are vines and that everything that matters begins with "me." Rather, we are connected to a family and to a parish and to a church and to a country and a world community.

We are connected to something larger than ourselves. We are connected to the people on the streets in downtown Seattle. We are connected to other parishes in our Archdiocese through the Annual Catholic Appeal. We are connected to men, women and children throughout the world who are dying of hunger and thirst. We are connected to the more than 150,000 Christians killed each year around the world, either out of hatred for the faith or for works of charity inspired by the faith. Saint Francis of Assisi believed that we are connected to all of creation.

We are connected with Audrey and Dominic and Kaitlyn in their First Holy Communion today. When we receive the Body and Blood of Christ let us remember that we are the branches and the risen Lord is the Vine. We don't have to be alone anymore.

Paul A. Magnano

Pastor