Fifth Sunday of Easter

April 28, 2013

You and I are about to exercise an extraordinary act of love. We are about to welcome two children into our community. They will become part of a people, God’s people. Their God is now the God of Moses and Abraham, the God of Jesus and Mary. Our God whispers love from a cross.

In so many of our Easter stories, there are messengers of encouragement. We find Paul and Barnabas retracing their missionary steps, going back to the cities where they first proclaimed the Gospel. Because they knew that, despite their new faith, those Christians were undergoing trials in their lives and needed to be encouraged.

The name Barnabas, by the way, means “son of encouragement.” The disciples were originally afraid of Paul because, after all, he was once the treacherous Saul who rounded up Christians and killed them. It was Barnabas, “son of encouragement,” who stepped in and encouraged the disciples to accept Paul and to believe that he truly was a converted follower of Christ. The early churches grew in faith because there were people like Paul and Barnabas and countless other women and men who encouraged others constantly.

In our Second Reading today, John writes of his vision to the seven churches of Asia Minor who were suffering persecution because of their faith, not unlike what is happening today right now. He encourages them by offering them the final vision of the heavenly Jerusalem where cruelty, pain, and opposition will all be banished forever.

In today’s Gospel Jesus is saying farewell to his friends at the Last Supper. Even as he begins his own trial that will lead to the cross, he leaves his disciples with a word of encouragement: Love one another, as I have loved you. Our God is like a mother who always encourages us. Pope Francis said so in a homily he preached just a few days ago.

The Sermon on the Mount commands us to love even our enemies. But how can we love our enemies if we cannot show encouragement to one another in the Christian community? How can we expect our children to know what love is if they first have not experienced it in their homes and in their parish? In a sense, it is true that charity begins at home.

It begins with a husband’s gentle word of encouragement to his wife. It begins with a mother’s firm but gentle word of encouragement to her children. It begins with this parish community, which rises above petty differences, competing personalities, and outside forces to build a community of faith like the early Christian community that cause people to remark, “Look how they love one another.”

It begins with baptism and this family Eucharist, where we remember that Jesus not only encouraged us to love one another but laid down his life for us. It is a tough task all of us assume today: to collaborate with Jesus in shaping children who will love as he loved. To do that, we ourselves have to love as Jesus loved. So, why don’t we pray quietly in our hearts for that kind of love? After all, Analisa and Joseph deserve no less.

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