

Bishop Bradley's Reflections on the Sunday Readings

April 24, 2016 Fifth Sunday of Easter

It seems that Spring has *finally* arrived in southwest Michigan. While it has officially been Spring for more than a month, this weekend are the first days when it actually looks, and begins to feel, like Spring. The daffodils are in full bloom; the forsythia have started to come out, and the buds on the trees are getting ready to "pop". And best of all, there was no sign of snow flurries in the seven-Day forecast!

This Fifth Sunday of Easter could be called "Spring" Sunday, or "New Life" Sunday. Each of the Scripture Readings speak of the "newness" that flows from our relationship with God and, in particular, speak to us about the New Life we share in the Risen Lord.

Today's First Reading from the Acts of the Apostles shows us Paul and Barnabas "on the move". In the six verses of this brief reading, we are told that Paul and Barnabas had visited nine different cities. That is no small feat when we realize what the travel conditions in those days were. They were motivated by their commitment to the message of the Good News of the Risen Lord---a message that they were so passionate about that they could not keep it to themselves. And so we heard that in every one of the cities they visited, "*they strengthened the spirits of the disciples and exhorted them to persevere in the faith.*" But let's pay attention to what their message was: "*It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.*" Paul and Barnabas and the other early missionaries were not promising those who first heard the Good News of Jesus any "pie in the sky" promises. They told them like it was! It is also interesting to pay particular attention to the final verse in today's reading when we are told how Paul and Barnabas "*opened the door of faith to the Gentiles*". It reminds us of the Holy Door that Pope Francis has asked every Cathedral, including our own here at St. Augustine Cathedral, to open a Holy Door during this Jubilee Year of Mercy. Paul and Barnabas and the early disciples opened the door for entire cities and the known part of the world at that time to a way to experience the Mercy of the Risen Christ----the same door that each of us needs to continue to keep open in our own lives as we realize our need to receive, and to extend, Jesus' Mercy.

And so, our First Reading shows the newness of the Good News of the Gospel spreading throughout the world like wildfire.

In our Second Reading from the Book of Revelation, we heard St. John's vision of "a *new heaven and a new earth*". And in that "new city of Jerusalem", we heard this incredible revelation: "*Behold, God's dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be His people, and God Himself will always be with them as their God.*" That's such a beautiful statement, one that contains an even more beautiful insight: "*He will wipe every tear from their eyes.*" Finally the Reading concludes with an amazing promise: "*Behold I make all things new.*"

The Gospel passage shows us Jesus at the Last Supper. He has just completed the meal with His apostles; Jesus has already washed the feet of the apostles as the powerful lesson on what it means to be a true leader----a true leader will be the servant of all; and Judas has just left the Upper Room to go and do what Satan had inspired him to do. From our perspective, knowing that He was about to be betrayed, begin His suffering and soon after, He would experience His death, we might think that Jesus would be thinking this is "the End". But, Jesus sees it just the opposite. We heard Him say: "*My children, I will be with you only a little while longer. I give you a NEW commandment: love one another.*" Sometimes, when we hear the word "love", we think of a watered-down version of what that word means. Sometimes, we reduce it down to something we really "like", or we might think it means that "we should be nice" to one another, or that we should practice the "Golden Rule". But Jesus doesn't mean that at all. He goes on to tell us exactly what He means by "love": "*As I have loved you, so you also should love one another.*" Well, that makes it much clearer. We all know how Jesus loved us: completely, totally, sacrificially, and unconditionally. THAT's how Jesus "commands" us to love one another----*just like He has loved us*. And then Jesus tells us: "*This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*"

Would people know you are a disciple of Jesus just by looking at the way you live your life? Would anyone know that I am a disciple by watching how I live my life? Do we just "talk the talk"? Or do we also "walk the walk"? There's one person that the whole world has come to know in a relatively short time---Pope Francis. His "talk" is new and fresh and insightful. But his "walk" is impressive, inspiring, and pretty unusual. In his newly-issued Apostolic Exhortation "Amoris Laetitia" (The Joy of Love), Pope Francis writes beautifully and clearly about the kind of Love Jesus commands us to live in our lives. He specifically looks at how we live out that

command to love in our most intimate relationships of marriage and family life. And Pope Francis also challenges the Family of the Church to make sure that it is love that we are following as our most primary command in our pastoral care of souls rather than simply legalism. Pope Francis challenges all of us, just as Jesus challenged the Apostles and the whole world. *“As I have loved you, you are to love one another.”* If we want to know what that means, all we have to do is look at the crucifix---that is our model, as we die to ourselves so that we can bring new life to others.

What about us? What will people---the world---see when they look at us? What can we do differently to make our lives “new” in the love of the Risen Christ? Let us reflect on that question throughout this week. As we see the leaves come out on the trees, and the flowers begin to bloom, and the “new life” of Spring continue to show itself all around us, let us ask our God Who loves us, Who makes His dwelling with us, Who makes all things “new” to renew us in His love.

God bless you, now and always.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

+ Bishop Paul J. Bradley