Spirituality
Scripture for Life



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In our high-tech global environment, many of us have smartphones, iPads, tablets plus desktop and laptop computers for personal and professional use. Some people spend a lot of time messaging, browsing, friending, tweeting and sharing. Many of us are involved in creating and sustaining virtual communities through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn, among a myriad other internet resources that bring people together in creative and interesting ways.

Recent statistics indicate, however, that as we grow more savvy with technology and become more connected to one another within and throughout cyberspace, we are, paradoxically, growing more distant from one another. Cyberspace relationships do not always allow us to detect tone in conversations, and online contacts often fall short on empathy. Social media stickers and emojis are no replacements for a handshake, a face-to-face smile and a needed hug.

This Sunday, we find ourselves still in the midst of the church's most joyous season, Easter. If the Resurrection were to happen today, all internet accounts would go offline, and cyberspace would experience a deafening silence. The magnitude and effect of the resurrection experience would leave the technological world completely stunned.

The readings for this Sunday are a stark reminder of what being "in relationship" means, and what is meant by being fully connected to the life-giving energy at the core of our lives. The writer of Acts sheds light on the effects that a personal encounter with Christ had on Saul's life. Once a murderer, Saul now becomes Jesus' disciple, to the consternation of the other disciples who, knowing Saul's background, continue to fear him until Barnabas relates Saul's conversion story to them. Only then is Saul accepted among the disciples. Saul is now "in relationship" with Christ, with God, with Barnabas and with the disciples. These relationships have been forged through personal encounters and direct storytelling.

Furthermore, the missionary activity of the church expands. The church grows as a result of the people's encounters with the disciples whose lives are filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit has the power to awaken the spirit in others and move them to form new relationships grounded in the love of the Lord.

In Psalm 22, this Sunday's responsorial, the psalmist presents a magnificent portrait of all peoples, whether alive or deceased, in relationship with God who is just. To this God, the psalmist will fulfill his vows in the presence of all who love God. The psalmist desires that the stories of divine justice be proclaimed to the next generation of descendants down through the ages so that all people will come to know the goodness of God. The sacred relationship between God and humanity will continue through personal response, through memory and through storytelling. Miguel, one of the main

characters in the Disney-Pixar movie entitled “Coco” drives this message home so creatively and passionately and provides us with a window into what the psalmist is trying to say to people then and now.

In the second reading, John, the so-called author of this text, encourages his listeners to love not only in word or speech but also in deed and truth. For John, love means being actively engaged in relationship with one another. This relationship involves the heart, the deepest place where one relates to God and to each other. John teaches his listeners that their deeds of love are the surest signs that they, in fact, do belong to God, and that in spite of sin and the human condition, the human-divine relationship is not irreparably broken.

John also makes clear that God is greater than the human heart. God knows the human heart and responds to the heart’s desires and needs. For John, love of neighbor brings people into union with God and with one another. This unifying love is a gift of the Spirit that abides in all and draws all together.

The Gospel reading from John continues the theme of being “in relationship.” The Gospel writer features Jesus using two metaphors to teach his disciples about the relationship that exists between Jesus and God, Jesus and the disciples, and the disciples and God. With the first metaphor, Jesus likens himself to a vine. He then describes God as “his Father” who is the vine grower. In the second metaphor, Jesus describes the disciples as pruned branches that are attached to the vine. With the care of the vine grower, both the vine and the branches are destined to bear fruit. The branches, however, will only bear fruit if they remain attached to the vine.

In sum, all four readings speak about the experience of being “in relationship” with God, Jesus and one another. This threefold relationship is established through interpersonal exchanges that are rooted in love and grounded in the Spirit. The gift of being “in relationship” offers a profound sense of intimacy and fulfillment, an experience that surfers of the web are unconsciously hungry to find but which can never be truly discovered or felt among one’s “virtual community.”

ACTS 9:26-31

This reading from Acts occurs after Saul’s conversion (9:1-19) but before Saul is ever called Paul (13:9). Before his arrival in Jerusalem, Saul had been in Damascus where he was proclaiming and proving that Jesus was the Messiah. Saul, once a murderer of Jesus’ disciples, becomes the recipient of a profound conversion experience that completely transforms his life and brings him into relationship with Jesus who dwells within the lives of the disciples. Now a disciple of Jesus, Saul tries to join Jesus’ disciples, yet because of his past reputation, the disciples are reticent to receive him into their company.

Interestingly, a discrepancy exists between this Lucan narrative and Paul’s own words in Galatians 1:18-19 where, according to Paul, he saw no one in Jerusalem except Peter and James. Hence, the author of Acts seems to be dependent on a tradition that attempts to fill in the sketchy details of Saul’s early days as a Christian. This tradition is less concerned with historical accuracy and more focused on advancing Saul’s great missionary activity among the Gentiles.

Barnabas seems to have known Saul before Saul’s arrival in Jerusalem. Because of this prior relationship, Barnabas becomes Saul’s advocate. Barnabas, whose name means “son of encouragement,” is a loyal disciple, and his actions on Saul’s behalf make him true to his name. In describing Barnabas’ role as Saul’s advocate before the apostles, the biblical author establishes a bond between Barnabas and Saul. This bond provides a foundation for the development of a close relationship between the two men which can be seen in Acts 11—15. In a verbal report to the disciples, Barnabas conveys Saul’s religious experience and the good work Saul is now doing. The work includes having debated with the Hellenists who then tried to kill him. The Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora who have now settled in Palestine. Formerly, Paul had represented this group in a battle against Stephen (6:8-15). Saul’s former comrades now become his new enemies. Thus, the one who sought out the disciples for persecution now becomes the one sought after himself as a result of his preaching. Saul’s experience of the Hellenists’ hostility toward him gives him credibility as a disciple of Jesus. Based on his experience and Barnabas’ report, Saul is now welcomed into the company of the disciples. They help him escape trouble by taking him to Caesarea, a port city, where he sets sail on a ship bound for Tarsus, his hometown (9:11).

The narrator's closing comment is an editorial summary reminding readers that the mission initiated by Jesus is well underway. The great persecutor has been transformed, and now God's people live in peace and walk in God's love and have the consolation of the Holy Spirit. All of these events described in this reading have taken place as a result of God, Jesus and God's people being in relationship with one another.

PSALMS 22:26-27, 28, 30, 31-32

Psalm 22 is a lament often proclaimed during Holy Week. This portion of the psalm, however, is a hymn of praise. Having been in the depths of affliction and having been delivered from this suffering (22:1-25), the psalmist is fully conscious of the happiness that has been brought about by the re-establishment of communion with God. The psalmist is now able to give thanks to God, a gesture symbolized by his fulfilling his vows in the presence of all who love God. In the ancient biblical world, the one suffering distress often vowed to bring offerings (Leviticus 7:15-21) and thanks in the courts of the temple. Thus, as a visible sign of his gratitude, the psalmist will pay a votive offering in the midst of all who love God. The votive offering will be a meal to which the poor will be invited so that they can share in the psalmist's happiness. Then they, too, may be confident that neither will the God who has helped the psalmist forsake their cause. The setting for this psalm seems to be a meal for the poor.

This meal is not just for the poor of Israel. Now Israel will include all nations. Relationships will expand, all people will be welcomed to the table, and all will come to realize, once again, the justice and graciousness of Israel's God who welcomes all to the holy mountain (Micah 4:1-7) and is thus deserving of all people's praise.

The scope of praise even includes all who have died and all who are yet to be born. The psalmist has now offered a profound vision of the reign of God which includes past, present and future generations, specifically, the whole world. The knowledge of the saving acts of God will be passed on from one generation to another. The psalmist has begun the storytelling of God's justice and graciousness, and the cycle of praise will continue forever. Praise is the deepest and greatest form of prayer.

1 JOHN 3:18-24

The themes of relationship and love heard in today's earlier readings continue in this passage from the First Letter of John. John, the so-called author of this text, opens his letter with a compelling exhortation calling those he addresses "children." John uses this term frequently throughout his letter, offering a portrait of the human-divine relationship that exists between God and the community of believers (3:1-10). Addressing his listeners as "children," not only refers to the human-divine relationship that exists between God and God's people but also exerts authority over them even though "children" is meant to be a term of endearment. Theologically, John understands God to be Father and Jesus to be Son. By using the term "children," John reminds his listeners how dearly they are loved by God who welcomes them into Jesus' divine family. John's listeners, then, are considered to be brothers and sisters of Jesus. These relationships exist because of God's great love, a gift given to God's people who are to offer it to others through concrete actions of love just as Jesus had done.

Even though "children" is meant to be a term of endearment, contemporary listeners of John's letter may find the term difficult to hear because it communicates a sense of hierarchy and subordination and not mutuality. Jesus once called his disciples friends, and Moses talked with God as one would with a friend (Exodus 33:11). By loving in deed and truth, God's people will attest to the reality of Christ, and through their lives, they will become a living witness to his resurrection within them and in their midst.

John uses the phrase "belong to the truth" in his letter (3:19) to establish a contrast between what is true and what is false. By using this phrase in this portion of his letter, John asserts that only those who belong to the truth are capable of responding to what he says. John is not saying that loving actions determine whether or not one belongs to God's community. Instead, John is reaffirming the inherent certainty of belonging, a theme heard earlier in his letter. This certainty is needed to quell anxious hearts.

Why the listeners' hearts may be experiencing anxiety is not altogether clear. Three possibilities exist. First, the people may have had their confidence shaken because of what they have experienced among believers. Second, they may feel

unable to attain the high expectations set forth by their elders within the community who continually call them to perfection. Third, they may feel that they have fallen short of loving others as they have been commanded to do. John encourages his listeners to remember that God is greater than their hearts and knows everything. Their hearts, then, are not to be a source of personal condemnation, and in their relationship with God, they are to approach God with confidence and make their needs known.

John's final words make clear that love is a unifying virtue. Those who love others are acting in accordance with the very nature of God, and for that reason, they can be assured that they abide in God and God in them. Relationships continue and life deepens.

JOHN 15:1-8

Using the metaphors of vine, vine grower and branches, the Gospel writer focuses on the now familiar theme of what it means to be "in relationship" at its deepest level. Jesus' instruction to his disciples is a timeless lesson. The Gospel's imagery and analogy would have been readily understood by John's community because the people were still largely an agrarian society. The metaphor of the vine harkens back to Isaiah 5:1-7 where the poet speaks of God's love for Israel and Israel's non-responsiveness to such love. As a result, Israel yielded good for nothing wild grapes.

In the first part of the narrative, Jesus makes clear to his disciples that he is the vine, God is the vine grower, and they — the disciples — are the branches that have already been pruned and are now ready to bear much fruit. Jesus' words are encouraging for the disciples, and he reminds them that they need to stay in relationship with him if they wish to bear fruit. Their own efforts apart from his will be fruitless.

In the second part of the narrative, Jesus reinforces the point that he is the vine and informs the disciples that they are the branches. What was implied earlier in the narrative now becomes totally clear. Jesus has unequivocally defined for his disciples the relationship that exists between him and them. In a more direct manner than heard earlier, Jesus emphatically makes the point that they can do nothing without him. For those who do not remain in Christ and in relationship with him, the consequences will be dire. These people will be like the branches that wither and then are gathered together, thrown into a fire, and burned. Destruction by fire is the usual practice with dry wood that has been cut off from the vine. The image has nothing to do with some notion of an eschatological fire that will destroy those who are apart from God.

John's narrative closes on an encouraging note. Just as the disciples remain faithful to Jesus, so Jesus and God will remain faithful to them and will respond to them whenever they are in need. God will become manifest through the fruit that the disciples will bear. What is at stake here is the transfer of God's own life through Jesus to the disciples and into the world. Thus, being in relationship with God can be a transformative experience for all creation.

Planning: 5th Sunday of Easter

By: Lawrence Mick

The readings this week bring us near to the heart of mystagogy, which is to say that they bring us face to face with the challenge of leading people into the mystery of God. The purpose of mystagogy is not just to explain the meaning of the sacraments but to lead people more deeply into the mystery that the sacraments celebrate.

In today's Gospel Jesus says that he is the vine and we are the branches. That is a very rich and powerful image. The branches draw their life from the vine; they share the very life of the vine. "Remain in me, as I remain in you," Jesus insists (John 15:4, NIV). That's the core truth of our faith. By baptism we became members of the body of Christ. We live in Christ and he lives in us. That's the mystery that should shape every aspect of our lives.

How well do you think your parishioners understand this truth? Do they really know that they are sharing in the very life of God and that God is not an external deity off in the heavens but the very lifeblood and breath within them? Do they recognize the radical unity that unites us not only with God but with every member of the body of Christ? Can they say

this with St. Paul? “I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).

Ultimately, this is not something to be grasped only with the intellect. It requires an experience of God’s presence that transcends our thoughts. For too long we have assumed that such experiences were only for mystics and other strange, holy people. But if we are to be mystagogues, then we are to lead others into the realm of mystery, into the very heart of God.

It may not be possible for preachers or planners to lead people into such depth in a Sunday liturgy. But we can help people to see that this is their calling. We can encourage parishioners to practice meditation or centering prayer, to spend time in silence to become more aware of the presence of God within them.

1 John uses different language to suggest similar insights:

And his commandment is this: we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us. Those who keep his commandments remain in him, and he in them, and the way we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit he gave us. (3:23-24)

As we approach Pentecost, this is a good time to highlight the gift of the Spirit given to each of us. That gift is God within us, a rich treasure we can draw upon for strength and guidance.

Prayers: 5th Sunday of Easter

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Today’s Gospel challenges the depth of our relationship to Christ, who calls himself the vine and us, the branches. The immediacy of this relationship was palpable among the early Christians. But what is it for us? We’ve been invited into something far deeper and more intimate than our relationship to our own family or someone we love. How comfortable are we with this invitation?

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you call us to be branches on the vine that is you: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you call us to remain in this deep relationship: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you have promised that we will bear much fruit: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray for all who long for deep and lasting relationships.

Minister For all Christians that we may be willing to risk a deeper relationship with Christ and with one another ... we pray,

- For people throughout the world who are victims of religious extremism or who fear those who believe or practice differently ... we pray,
- For those who resist a deep relationship with Christ, who fear what it may require of them ... we pray,
- For pastors and teachers, catechist and theologians, mystics and prayer leaders, who are dedicated to enhancing our relationship to Christ ... we pray,

- For the life-giving connection we have with Jesus, the true vine; that we may be nourished by this deep and vital relationship ... we pray,
- For hearts and minds open to knowing Christ in this community; and for all among us who need the healing of this relationship, especially the sick, the dying and all who suffer ... we pray,

Presider God, who reaches out to us in so many ways, we are called again to live in and remain in a deep relationship with your Son, the true vine. Strengthen our desire to respond to his invitation, despite its demands. We pray in the name of the One who calls us to bear fruit. Amen.

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