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May 1, 2021

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“Remain in me, as I remain in you” (John 15:4).

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 9:26-31; Ps 22; 1 John 3:19-24; John 15:1-8

The image of the vine and the branches provides multiple references to the organic growth and intimate union with Jesus that is the source of the vitality of the church. It conveys well St. Paul’s central idea of the church as the body of Christ, a living communion of the baptized with one another and with the crucified and risen Christ in the world. The metaphor covers many aspects of the Christian life as something cultivated, pruned to maximize productivity, open to ecumenical grafting and, in the end, directed to joy, the new wine of love in the vineyard of the Lord.

One verb repeated often in the fourth Gospel is “to remain.” The first disciples who followed Jesus home remained with him. Their growth and maturity required that they follow him and know him from the exuberant first days of discipleship in Galilee, then through the confusion and suffering of his journey to Jerusalem and apparent failure, and finally through the mystery of his death and resurrection. Just as the branch may take years to produce grapes, so the disciple must remain on the vine through seasons of growth to show results.

The author of 1 John anticipated the challenges of remaining faithful, especially from loss of confidence or even self-rejection for failing to live the ideals of union with

Christ. Even if our conscience condemns us, God is greater than our conscience and sustains us in mercy and unconditional love. How discouraged the early missionaries, including St. Paul, must have been by the controversies and attacks they suffered from within and without. Yet they pressed on, remained in the love Jesus had poured out on them even when they were sinners. The history of the church is a miracle of mercy and a message of mercy to an obstinate and sinful world.

Dorothy Day often said that the goal of the Catholic Worker was not success but remaining faithful. God alone can produce abundant fruit through us if we stay on the vine, even if we do not feel successful or see progress on our own terms. How many reformers endured rejection and silencing in the decades before the Second Vatican Council, only to emerge as its architects? How many modern-day martyrs, both physical and spiritual, saw their lives and work cut short, only to bear fruit in God's time?

Intimacy with Christ is the one thing necessary, the contemplative source of all genuine results that build up the body of Christ. A single mature Christian positioned within a faithful community of disciples can inspire everyone in the full use of their gifts to produce astonishing results. God is the patient gardener who finds and nourishes such holiness. We can all experience it if we remain on the vine of God's love in Christ Jesus.

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