

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 9:26-31
<i>Response</i>	From thee comes my praise in the great congregation
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 22:26-27, 28, 30, 31-32
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 John 3:18-24
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Abide in me, and I in you. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit...
<i>Gospel</i>	John 15:1-8

The fifth Sunday of Easter continues our journey through the magnificent epistle of 1 John — very mystical, very beautiful letter in the New Testament. And today's reading is going to be from 1 John 3:18-24. And it's all about the theme of the relationship between obedience and union with God. So let's see what St. John has to say. 1 John 3:18 reads:

Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth. By this we shall know that we are of the truth, and reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who keep his commandments abide in him, and he in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit which he has given us.¹

Okay, so you can kind of hear here, as you listen to these words, once again the very simple but very profound style of the first letter of St. John. He's not using very complex rhetorical arguments or the kind of movements that you'll see, for

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

example, in the letters of St. Paul, where he's using lots of logical arguments — arguments from Scripture that are very complex and sophisticated. He's just making these kind of straightforward statements. And yet, when you actually try to slow down and read what he's saying, they're deep. They're profound, and they're not always exactly immediately accessible. They actually kind of require some explanation. So let's just walk through and do a little bit of that together.

The first thing I would highlight here is his expression:

Little children... (1 John 3:18a)

That's an odd way to address the congregation to whom he's writing this letter, unless you go back to the beginning of the letter and you recall that John uses these images of three groups of people. He addresses his words to “little children” (number one), to “young men” (number two), and then to “fathers” (number three). Now most scholars — and I think this is right — don't interpret those words to mean that John thinks he's actually writing a letter that the little children in the Church will read and then that the teenage boys in the youth group are going to read, and then that the dads are going to read in their men's group. That's not the idea. It's not meant to be taken literally.

These are spiritual categories of levels of spiritual maturity. “Little children” refers to spiritual beginners. “Young men” refers to those more spiritually advanced. And then “fathers” refers to those who are spiritually the most advanced. And this ancient reading of 1 John goes all the way back to Origen of Alexandria in the third century, who connected this with the three stages of spiritual growth that would later be identified as the Purgative, Illuminative, and Unitive Stages of the spiritual life — the idea that spiritual growth goes through stages of spiritual childhood, spiritual adolescence, and spiritual adulthood, just like natural life ordinarily goes through all three of those stages of physical, emotional, intellectual growth.

So in this case, John is using this phrase “little children” to address his audience, and he's giving them a very basic teaching:

Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth. (1 John 3:18)

Alright, so notice here, this is a standard example of a kind of Semitic contrast — it's an antithetical parallelism. That's what scholars call it. But it just means you set up a contrast: not this, but this. But you don't mean in an absolute way "not this." It's just a way of saying, "This and how much more this." So he's saying:

...let us not love in word or speech...

He doesn't mean that we shouldn't be loving in our words. What he's saying is that we can't merely love people through what we say; we also have to add actions to our words. So basically, this is the Johannine equivalent (John's equivalent) of what we find in the letter of James:

So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:17)

It's not enough just to confess Jesus is Lord with your mouth. You actually have to live according to that confession with your works. So he's calling the spiritual children in his congregation to remember that they can't just speak the truth; they have to act the truth. They have to live by the truth. They have to walk in love. And then he goes on to say:

By this we shall know that we are of the truth, and reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. (1 John 3:19)

So notice the emphasis here is on keeping the commandments, on our actions, on our works. And this is really important for us to see, because when we look at 1 John 3:18, when he says:

...let us not love in word or speech but in deed...

We tend to associate love primarily with an emotion, like an emotional attraction to someone or an emotional delight in something. “I love this person” or “I love donuts” or something like that. We might take delight in some kind of sensible pleasure. But what John is referring to when he speaks of love is an action. It’s a choice that you make. We don’t just *feel* love; we *do* it. *Agapē* is the Greek word that he’s using there. And so the way we express love and the way we abide in God who is love is to keep his commandments.

Now for many of us, when we think about the commandments, we think about the commandments primarily as rules, like rules for life. If you want to get ahead, keep the commandments. If you want to be okay with God, if you want to get right with God, you keep the commandments. And that’s of course true. They are rules, on a certain level. But the rationale for the rules — the deeper meaning behind the rules — is completely oriented toward love.

So the first commandments against blasphemy, idolatry, and breaking the Sabbath are commandments ordered to the love of God. That’s how you love God. You don’t blaspheme Him, you don’t commit idolatry, and you keep the Sabbath holy. And then the second set of commandments are ordered toward love of neighbor. We don’t kill, we don’t steal, we don’t commit adultery, we don’t covet, we don’t bear false witness. So the actual heart of the commandments is to *do* love, is to live in love. And that’s what John’s laying out here, that we have to walk in the commandments and love God and love neighbor, because this is what pleases God when we keep His commandments.

Now, that’s of course the Ten Commandments. But Jesus in the Gospel of John is going to add a new commandment He’s going to give to the disciples — to love one another as He has loved us, as He has loved the disciples. Then John goes on to say:

And this is his commandment...

Meaning the Father’s commandment...

...that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. (1 John 3:2)

Alright, pause there. So what is this singular commandment that John is referring to, that Jesus commanded us. Well, this is an allusion to the Gospel of John 13:34-35. If you recall, you go back to the Gospel of John. When Jesus is with the disciples at the Last Supper in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, He pours out His blood. In Luke, He says:

This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.
(Luke 22:20b)

So it makes a new sacred bond with them. But in the Gospel of John, Jesus doesn't just speak of a new covenant — like He does in the Synoptics — but He speaks rather of a new commandment. So John gives us...he supplements the testimony of the Synoptics. And in John 13:34-35, Jesus to the disciples:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Okay, so if you go back to 1 John, when John is talking about keeping the commandment of Christ, that we love another as He commanded us, that's an allusion to Jesus' new commandment at the Last Supper. So the kind of love — this is important — that John is calling his congregation to in this epistle is not just the love of neighbor or the love of God we see in the Ten Commandments. That's the baseline. Yes, you shouldn't blaspheme. Yes, you shouldn't commit adultery. Yes, you shouldn't steal.

But he's actually calling *his* audience (the readers of *this* letter) and then the Church is calling *us* during Easter to love as Christ loved, which isn't just avoiding committing grave evil against someone else, against your neighbor...but actually embracing sacrificial love for the neighbor — laying down our lives, laying down our will for the sake of another, for the sake of the other. That's loving as Christ commanded us.

And what's fascinating about this — the last line — John goes on to say:

All who keep his commandments abide in him, and he in them. (1 John 3:24a)

Alright, pause there. This is really, really crucial. Especially in older generation Catholics, probably would have been familiar with the fact — with the teaching of the *Catechism*, like the *Baltimore Catechism*, something like that — that if we keep the commandments...we have to keep the commandments (the Ten Commandments) in order to remain in the state of grace, that to violate one of the Ten Commandments in a grave way is a mortal sin and would remove us from the state of grace and put us in a state of mortal sin. Most people are familiar with that concept.

But John goes even further. He says that if we keep Jesus' commandments, we don't just remain in a state of grace. That's not the language he uses. What he says is that we abide in Christ *and* that Christ abides in us. So that's the language of mysticism, the language of abiding. It's a Greek word *menō*. It's the same word Jesus uses in the Gospel of John in chapter 6 when he says:

He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. (John 6:56)

So if you want to have mystical union with Jesus (in John chapter 6), if you want Him to dwell within you *and* you want somehow to dwell *in Him*, His Mystical Body, you have to eat His flesh and drink His blood.

And I think many Catholics have a pretty good idea of that idea of a sacramental union with Christ. In Holy Communion, we're united to Christ. He's united to us. He dwells in us, and we dwell in Him. What we tend not to have as clear a notion of is the mystical union that flows from obedience to the commandments. John is saying here, the only kind of mystical union we have is not just the sacramental union (the Eucharist), it's also the union of obedience:

All who keep his commandments abide in him, and he in them. (1 John 3:24a)

And the obvious implication too is that if we break one of those commandments, then John will actually go on in chapter 5 to talk about deadly sin. That isn't just a violation of the rule, it's the destruction, it's the violation of a relationship...whereby Christ does *not* abide in us if we violate those commandments, if we commit a mortal sin. It severs that union between the soul and Christ. And he goes on to say:

And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit which he has given us. (1 John 3:24b)

So Christ abides in us through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God. And you can see, just as we're running through this — this will happen a lot in the letters of the New Testament — that the whole discussion of everything John is speaking about here is Trinitarian. Who has he mentioned? Father's commandment, to believe in His Son; the Son, Jesus Christ the Son of God; and then the indwelling of the Spirit. So there's always a kind of Trinitarian framework through which the apostles are giving their catechesis.

And at least for me, I've just found this passage from John very moving but also very challenging to the way I tend to think about obedience. We tend to think of obedience as: "Well, I'll obey whatever authority someone has over me so that I don't get punished." We can tend to think of God's obedience that way... so our obedience *to* God that way: "So I'm going to keep the commandments so that I don't get punished."

But John goes deeper here, as he always does. If you want to abide in Christ, then keep His commandments — not just the Ten Commandments, but the commandment to love one another as Christ has loved us.

So in closing, I want to give you a little reflection on this. This is from St. Bede of Northumbria, a famous Doctor of the Church, saint from the middle ages — late 7th, early 8th century. And he did the first commentary on the Catholic epistles of

John and James and Peter. And in his *Commentary on 1 John*, he has a reflection about this particular verse for the reading for today. And this is what he says:

Therefore, “Let God be your house and you be the house of God; abide in God and let God abide in you. *God abides in you that he may surround you, you abide in God that you may not fall*” (Augustine, *Homilies on 1 John* 9.1). Keep his commandments, hold on to charity, do not be separated from faith in him, that you may glory in his presence, and you will abide secure in him now through faith, then through sight. *And he will abide in you always...* “And by this we know that he abides in us, by the spirit which he has given us” [1 John 3:24]. In the earliest times the Holy Spirit fell upon believers and they spoke in tongues which they had never studied. But nowadays, because the holy Church does not need external signs, whoever believes in the name of Jesus Christ and has love for his brother gives witness to the Holy Spirit abiding in him. For the Holy Spirit brings it about that charity may be in man, “for charity has been poured in our hearts,” Paul says, “by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us”.²

That’s Bede’s *Commentary on 1 John* 3:24. So notice what Bede is saying here. He’s pointing out that the reason we can even think to love like Christ loves is not through our own power but through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, who is the charity of God that has been poured into our hearts at Baptism and then gives us the strength to do two things. First, to believe, to have faith — the supernatural gift of faith in the Son of God. But then also to love, to imitate Christ and to love as He loves.

So...I emphasized obedience as I was walking through John’s verses, but remember it’s a two-fold commandment:

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. (1 John 3:2)

² Bede, *Commentary on 1 John* 3:24 (trans. Dom David Hurst, O.S.B.)

So faith *and* love — or James' language, faith and works. Those two things go together, and they're both the fruits of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us that we received at our Baptism.

So in closing then, I just would encourage you as you're thinking about this commandment here and about this passage from John, to really ponder the mystery of the fact that we are not only united mystically to Jesus through the sacramental reception of the Eucharist. That's absolutely true. But according to 1 John, we're also united to Jesus and united — we abide in Christ — through faith in His divinity and His Messiahship and through charity, through the exercise (the practice) of the virtue of love.