

The Inclusive Community

Seventh Sunday of Easter

May 24, 2009

Homily of Anthony T. Padovano

Gratitude and Dedication

John 17: 6-19

When we love someone we are filled with a sense of gratitude and a desire to be dedicated to that person.

We see Jesus in this passage, on the eve of his death and departure, filled with gratitude for his disciples and dedicated to them. He clearly loves them.

The language is tender, affectionate, not sentimental, but movingly emotional. John brings us in this passage into the soul of Jesus.

You and I are disciples of Jesus. The word “disciple” means someone who learns from another, someone who listens to another. We learn so much from the life of Jesus. If we listen to his life, we grow and we see the world in a way that liberates us and makes us more of who and what we wish to be. A disciple of Jesus is part of a community, part of a church. We do not seek to do this on our own. That is why you and I are here, in this community of friends and believers.

But we know, as Jesus tried to teach us, in this passage, that we do not belong to the church. We belong to something much grander. We belong to life, to our own life and to the life of everyone who brings us life. We are not made for ecclesiastical bondage or the lifelessness of believing only in a limited meaning for ourselves and for our future. The church is only as good as the Christ it serves. The church works for us only when it loves us the way Jesus clearly does.

Let us look for a moment at the words Jesus uses for gratitude and for dedication in this passage.

First, gratitude.

Jesus prays on the eve of his crucifixion for “those whom you gave me.” When we love someone, we believe that that person was given to us by a force, a mystery, an energy that was not ours. A man in love with a woman marvels at how she came into his life and who it

was who made her the miracle she is. A parent, holding a new-born child, knows that this child was given by a presence in the universe that is not ours.

“Those whom you gave me,” Jesus says to God, were your gift to me.

He looks at the disciples, for the last time before his death, and he says to God: “they have kept your word.” His is proud of them, pleased with them. He rejoices in who they are, what they have become, all that they have achieved.

Jesus says to the disciples and to us that we have kept the word God delivered to the world and so the church must learn what God says to the world by listening to us.

Let us apply this to our relationship with one another.

When a man loves a woman, he knows that she has kept the word of his life. Somehow, this stranger, this woman who arrives later in his life, has the secret of his life and the meaning of it. He learns who he is by hearing her. And every child who comes from her has another syllable, a few more letters, a clause, a phrase of the message life teaches him.

If you become a teacher, by your pupils you will be taught. Or a parent. Or a life partner.

We do not keep the word of our life apart from the ones we love, the ones who deliver that word to us.

And now, let us consider dedication.

From this abundance of gratitude, Jesus feels a profound dedication to the disciples. “Protect them,” he prays. “I protected them as long as I could.” Is not that line moving? “Protect them.” Later in the passage he adds as he repeats the words, “Protect them from evil.” He is about to die and all he can think of is them.

If we do not feel protected in the church, the way we do in this community, we must flee it for the sake of Christ.

Jesus ends this passage with heart-breakingly beautiful words. “My joy is in them,” he says to God.

Is this not what every man who loves a woman says of her? Is this not what every parent who loves a child feels for that child?

Not only do those in love keep the word of our life, they also keep our joy. “My joy is in them.”

No founder of any other world religion spoke so beautifully, so emotionally, of those who listened and became disciples.

And, then, this astonishing conclusion. It is “for their sake I sanctify myself.” In other words, it is for them that I want to be good, to get it right, to do it correctly.

A man who loves a woman wants to be good for her. A parent who loves a child wants to be good for that child so that the memory of us the child has will always bring joy and peace.

The journey to Jesus is always the journey to ourselves, to the heart and soul of us, to the inner core where all is gratitude and dedication.