



The Inclusive Community

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Love and Discipleship

May 2, 2010

John 13: 31-35

Homily of Rev. Dr. Anthony T. Padovano

What do we do in a season of disenchantment? How do we hold on to hope when despair is in the air and the dawn is painfully delayed?

One way of coping with such a time is to ask ourselves if we are in the wrong place, with wrong expectations, having made wrong choices.

When I counsel married couples whose marriages are all but over, I ask them to recall what they wanted from marriage and from each other when love was intense and their passion for each other filled with promise.

The couples always review the most simple, almost child-like, always naïve and yet never irrelevant ways they once felt about each other. In a moment of crisis, when shipwreck is imminent, simplicities matter.

And so couples recall that they wanted more than anything else to be with each other. The face, the touch, the voice, the name, the memory of the other – this was magic. They wanted each other. And if they had that, the whole world was theirs. That we, all of us, so often imperfect, should ever have known such moments of pure bliss makes having lived worth all the cost and the burden and the pain.

There is strength in returning to simplicities. Couples, in the beginning, did not think of mortgages and miscarriages, of unemployment and dependent parents, of adolescent children and the loss of friends, of becoming elderly and wondering if the other spouse or children took them for granted.

If a couple can hack their way through this jungle and maze of complexity and find again the clear space and clean place of their first simplicities, they have a chance. If they cannot, the sooner they leave each other the better. I think that what anniversaries are meant to do is to remind us of the simple things that made us once experience the greatest love we ever knew.

Let me apply the familiar story of human relationships to today's Gospel passage.

The Gospel of John was written sixty years after Jesus of Nazareth was executed. Memories are becoming elusive and those who lived then, Christianity's greatest generation, are, for the most part, no longer alive.

John is writing around the year 90. The last twenty years, from 70-90, were Golgotha in another form, a crucifixion of hope and the burial of all the dreams that once made it possible to endure. If Jesus was crucified, sixty years earlier, the Spirit, it seemed, died in the years 70-90.

The Temple was destroyed. Israel was decimated. Jerusalem was gone. The official Jewish community expelled the reform Jews, now called Christians, from all the synagogues. The Roman Empire began a persecution of the disciples of Jesus. One apostle after another was executed. Peter was crucified in Rome and Paul was beheaded there in the long summer of the year 64. The Christian community was divided between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians, between those who argued that martyrdom was the only way to be faithful and those who said that compromise allowed Christians to live and witness another day. There was no New Testament and no clear definition of who Jesus was. What was clear was that he had not come back and that all those who knew him misinterpreted him. They thought the world would end around 30 or 40 and they were wrong. Things were getting worse, not better. Christianity was persecuted, targeted, rejected like no other religion in the Roman Empire.

John's Gospel asks the community to return to the simplicities. He asks what it was that once made faith in Jesus of Nazareth the pearl of great price. It was something very simple. In effect, he says we did not follow him because we wanted the Temple or Jerusalem, the Roman Empire on our side or even expecting to get a Bible out of this. We did not become his disciples because he promised to make things go right or return to us after death or bring about the end of the world in a Second Coming.

What made us follow? We loved him. We did not need a perfect church or a compliant Roman Empire to love him. We simply loved him: who he was, what he did, how he spoke, what he saw.

When he left us, John said, he told us, “you will look for me.” And, let me tell you, John writes, to the Christian community, let me tell you what he said about how we could find him and never lose him. He said “Love one another.” Why is that too simple for us? Why did we add such complexities to the terms of the relationship? Why did we now want to prevail against Judaism and Rome before we would believe in him? Will victories there make us love him more?

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another...as I have loved you.” He did not need a Temple (it rejected him) or the Roman Empire (it executed him) or a Second Coming or the end of the world or followers who always agreed with one another or who understood him or who would write the New Testament.

None of those items were on the table of the Last Supper. He knew he would die and that almost all his disciples would choose compromise over martyrdom when he was arrested. He did not want heroism or mighty deeds from us. He only wanted love. That is all a mother wants from a child or a husband wants from his wife.

When things get too simple, we run for refuge in complexities. Churches and Creeds make life so complicated that no one fully understands it. Canon Law is nothing like the Beatitudes; the Creeds never sound like the Parables.

Let us listen carefully, clearly. “Love one another...as I have loved you.” Churches and Creeds leave out the love. Canon Law leaves out this commandment. Churches claim that such a rule is not simple but simple-minded, not child-like but childish, not energizing but inefficient. It cannot work. And so we build institutions. But love for an institution never gives us what love of Jesus does,

Love of being married is not the same as loving your wife.

“Love one another as I have loved you.” Everything else is marginal and even corrupting if we take it seriously. It’s a little like letting the mortgage get in the way of the marriage or letting one’s in-laws define the relationships. Mortgages and in-laws matter but they do not make you fall in love.

“Love one another as I have loved you.” Never settle for less. If you do, you will miss Christ.