



BENEDICTINE SISTERS OF CHICAGO

Fifth Sunday of Easter April 28, 2024
Reflection by Virginia Jung, OSB

First Reading - Acts 9: 26-31
Second Reading - 1 John 3: 18-24
Gospel - John 15: 1-8

As always, there is a lot going on in today's readings, in Scripture, the inspired Word of God. It is an inexhaustible source of instruction and inspiration, so it is always an adventure to determine what to concentrate on in reflections.

This gospel is taken from Jesus' talk to the apostles at the Last Supper or the 1st Eucharist (depending on how you look at it). When Jesus says, "because of the word I spoke to you", He is talking about words, about a message delivered personally, in person, from Himself to his friends. In his letter, when John writes about "the commandments", he refers both to the commandments that God gave to Moses and to the commandment that Jesus had personally shared and modeled with the people, the commandment to love. These words and commandments are available to us because someone took the time to write them down, to preserve them and to pass them along. And they are real, living words once spoken from one person to others.

As we hear and reflect on them today, we understand that they are directed to the entire Church and to each one of us individually; they are also directed to us in the many systems in which we participate, perhaps especially in our monastic community in a time that calls us to rely on and live into our vows of obedience, stability, and conversion or fidelity (take your pick) to the monastic way. I recognize the Oblates here who do not take vows but who share these values and live into them in their own circumstances.

St. Scholastica Monastery is one vineyard of many that God has planted. We have the real, organic vineyard out back that our Sisters planted and have tended over the years. It is a wonderful visual, tactile reminder of this metaphor which Jesus and the prophets have used to illustrate our relationship with God and with each other.

During recent weeks, I have been reading the book *Biblical Meditations for the Easter Season* by Carroll Stuhlmueller, CP, a Passionist Father and scholar who spent time with the brothers at Holy Cross Abbey in Canon City. Maybe you knew him there. Anyway, he reflects on this vine that is Jesus, the vine of which we are the branches, and how this parable shows "the intimacy and cost of unity", something we are experiencing in this time as we commit to our own process of discernment. He writes:

From this comparison it were as though all of us shared the same blood which flowed through a common network of arteries and veins. Jesus is the heart whose rhythmic beat sends the blood coursing through us. The life and strength of one person are the vitality and sustenance of the other. Even the secret thoughts of one member will have an effect, good or bad, upon the others. No member can be totally healthy if any other member is sickly.

Stuhlmeuller calls us to accountability for our inner and outer selves and for our commitment to the whole. He goes on to talk about the pruning that is required for each one and the fertilizing or nurturing that the branches need. He recommends liturgy, Eucharist, prayer and “peaceful surrender to what is known as the will of Jesus.” Because this interdependence of the vine, branches, and vinegrower also informs Benedict’s Rule, it informs our life of seeking God in community, which on any given day may feel life giving or life draining.

In my lectio divina with these texts, the two words that stood out to me were ask and remain. Along with asking God for what we need and want, confident that we will receive it, there is a process of discernment so that our ask is in line with God’s will for us. Everyone here knows the openness and humility that it requires, the commitment to conversatio, that makes that alignment possible.

The word remain is used twice in John's letter and eight times by Jesus in his parable of the vine. As I read it, remain, remain, remain, it was jarring since I had the sense that we are on the move, uprooting ourselves, not remaining here – but I also had the sense that it was more about the value of stability than about physical location, so it lead me to explore a bit and to reflect on the vow of stability, and really all of the vows because they are all woven into these readings. It reminded me of how important it is for us to use them, to consider how to live them and how they can guide us in our listening to God and each other these days.

In the Rule, stability is required of each one who wants to belong to the monastery, be they a priest, a visiting monk, or a newcomer. It gets defined at the end of Chapter 4 The Tools for Good Works, right? Verse 78 tells us that “the workshop where we are to toil faithfully at all these tasks is the enclosure of the monastery and stability in the community.” There has been a lot of ink spent on distinguishing between enclosure as who can come and go from the monastery and stability as the life commitment to seeking God with a particular group of people. It is about accepting the teachings and living by them, as these Scripture readings also insist on – the integration of faith and works.

Another writer who finds a relationship between Jesus’ use of remain and the monastic vow of stability is the Cistercian monk, Charles Cummings in the revised edition of his book *Monastic Practices*. I thought it was interesting that the chapter on Stability is #12 of 13. It comes right before the last chapter – From Death to Life. This says to me that he sees Stability not only as an initial vow but as a quality only embodied by a lifetime of living it. Where Cummings identifies the remain-stability connection is in an event that took place right after the First Eucharist, Jesus’ agony in the garden. Now, on the threshold of our own unknown future, you might be going through a sort of agony in the garden experience of your own. Cummings writes:

If stability means sharing life, it means being with others both in times of harmony and in times of struggle. In the life of Jesus, there is an instance when he sought human support in a time of struggle and found none. According to Matthew’s description of the agony in the garden, Jesus said to Peter, James, and John, “My heart is nearly broken with sorrow. Remain here and stay awake with me.” The word remain can also be

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translate as abide, be united to, live in, dwell in, stay with. The qualities of the monastic practice of exterior and interior stability are implicit in Jesus' exhortation to "remain here and stay awake."

Cummings explains that for the monastic, exterior stability is "a promise to stay in this community with Christ and with all the others and to stay awake in order to support each other during the struggle. Interiorly, one's heart is awakened to the needs and feelings of others, to the will and the working of God in our midst."

So we do not know God's what exact plan for the future of our monastic vine is, will it be cut down, transplanted, cuttings taken and propagated, or maybe some other horticultural metaphor that escapes me. We can trust, however, that listening deeply to God and to each other is an essential part of our prayer and work today and always.