

Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 5, 2013
Homily for the Anglican Use Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
John 14:23-29

In our Gospel today Jesus talks to us about keeping His word, and we know that this means the new commandment that he demonstrated in the washing of the feet at the Last Supper—"to love one another as He has loved us." Therefore, when He says that "he who does not love me does not keep my words," He means that when we fail to love one another, we fail to love Jesus.

The washing of the feet was a prefiguration of the crucifixion, the Lord's Passion by which we were redeemed in the Blood of the Lamb. Thus, we understand that to love is to sacrifice oneself for the good of others. Love persists primarily in sacrifice, but it is not every day that we are called to be literal martyrs. So it is helpful to look at the biblical definition of love if we are to understand how this sacrifice plays itself out in our lives on a daily basis.

The first place we look, of course, is in Matthew 25, where Jesus tells us, "Even as you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." That is, our acts of charity to those Jesus loves are the way we demonstrate love, by visiting the sick and the imprisoned, by feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, by giving drink to the thirsty and welcoming the stranger. The corporal works of mercy are the means by which we love our neighbor and thus show we love Jesus. Those corporal works of mercy are the means by which we love one another as Jesus loved us.

But even as we undertake those works of mercy, we must adopt the correct disposition, the correct orientation that communicates love. We must exude love in the way we speak and act, even as we undertake good works. To understand what this looks like, we have been given St. Paul's ode to love, which we find in First Corinthians 13, the passage from the Bible so often heard at weddings. "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful, it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

In many ways what we just heard here is more difficult than the martyr's death. The martyr's palm most often comes very quickly to victims of the world's wrath. But love as St. Paul describes it, as Jesus Himself demands it, must be cultivated over the course of a lifetime, formed every day in order that the good works we do are undertaken for the right reason and that Jesus' love shines through our charity.

It is helpful here to remember the two roles we assume in life if we bear the name of Christ. First, there is the servant who gives. When we as servants of Jesus pour ourselves out to aid the needy, there must never be given the impression that we begrudge them our own generosity. Our charity must be undertaken in a spirit of humility, desirous to feed the souls of our brothers as much as we desire to feed their bodies. When we decide to help someone out, we can't behave as though we're doing him a favor. When we assume the role of the servant who gives, it must be apparent to the receiver of this gift that we are grateful for the opportunity to serve him, that we see in him the face of Jesus, and that we desire to treat him just as Jesus would do it.

The other role we assume is that of the servant who receives. Now we know, obviously, that every gift we have has come from God. But the reality is that Jesus uses His human creatures as instruments of His grace, so we must see the face of Jesus in those who give us gifts as surely as we see the face of Jesus in those to whom we give gifts. And just as we must be grateful for the opportunity to serve others, so we must be grateful that God sends servants to serve us.

Just yesterday, we were talking at dinner about St. Zita, the 13th century Italian saint who is the patroness of housekeepers and servants. When she was twelve, she went to serve a wealthy family of weavers, and they did not receive her goodness well. In fact, she took much abuse for her kindness. And more than that, her fellow servants resented her for her piety, obedience, and generosity. In other words, they did not receive the gifts in the spirit St. Paul describes in his ode to love.

St. Zita's ministry to the family she served reminds us that those from whom we receive gifts aren't necessarily those who have more than we do; and the gifts we are receiving may well be spiritual and not material. Plus, she reveals the human tendency among too many to be kind only when they are giving gifts. When they are the ones in control, so they think, of the situation. She reveals how difficult it is for many people to receive what God desires to give them, and we ought to remember what she endured when we are tempted to be less than gracious, having received a gift from a neighbor. We can also remember her steadfastness and fortitude, for she kept giving despite the abuse and eventually won the conversion of her family and her fellow house maids.

If we live in this way, our gospel today also teaches us what is the fruit of such love. Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." The fruit of loving as Jesus did, both in His Passion and in His daily life, is peace. On the one hand, there is the eternal peace that is the fruit of a life on earth lived well, and on the other is the inner peace, the freedom of a clear conscience that assures us we have loved our neighbor as Jesus loved us, both in the gifts we gave and in those we received.

What Jesus does not promise is temporal peace. In fact, we heard today, "Not as the world gives do I give to you." What the world so often gives is strife, conflict, and just plain rudeness, a vulgarity in daily interactions that, absent our faith, would crush our souls. St. Zita's example is so valuable because it shows us we can have peace, here and forever, even when our time on earth is truly a valley of tears. What she knew is that the way to peace is love, not just the love we get from God, but the love we give to Him, day in, day out.