

Homily for the 5th Sunday of Easter

Nearly 9 years ago – May 20, 2006 – I was ordained a transitional deacon for the Diocese of Harrisburg. It was that very weekend – the 5th Sunday of Easter – that I preached for the first time in front of a live congregation. Oh sure, we practiced preaching in the seminary in front our classmates. But this was to be the very first time in front of a live studio audience. And since our Scripture readings each weekend follow a three-year cycle of readings, it was actually these very same readings we just heard today that I preached on then. You know, I have to admit, I have no recollection whatsoever of what I spoke about that day – I was just so nervous! But, I do know that whatever those words were, they touched some people very deeply that day – they told me so. And that was the amazing thing! Because just 4 ½ years earlier, in September 2001, when I first entered the seminary, I saw the deacons preaching at our seminary Masses, and thought to myself, “There is no way on earth I’ll ever be able to do that.” And I re-assured myself that my own deacon ordination was a long ways off. Nothing like denial! But now, all these years later, I have to say that preaching is one of my favorite parts of being a priest! And I’m a witness to how God can work such transforming miracles in our lives over time.

Just look at Saul, who we hear about in our first reading today. This Saul was the same man who later became the Saint Paul, who traveled all over the Roman Empire proclaiming the Good News and bringing countless men and women into the Christian faith. But again, before he had that major conversion in his life and became the Saint Paul we all know, he was the rigid Pharisee who zealously persecuted the first Christians. God worked a transforming miracle in Saul's life too!

Or perhaps you've had a comparable experience in your life, where there was some type of obstacle or hurdle or challenge that you thought there was no way to move, jump over, or overcome. And yet from your vantage point right now looking back, you can see that it was nothing short of a miracle that you are where you are right now. Sure, it might not have been an instantaneous, flashy miracle with all the bells and whistles that we think miracles are supposed to have – but a miracle, nonetheless!

How do such things happen? Well, they happen because of who God is, not because of who we are or what we do or anything like that. In the words of Max Lucado, a famous Christian author, things happen when we learn “to trust that the power of prayer is in the One who hears the prayer, not in the one who says it.” In the words of today's Scripture readings, such things happen because Jesus is truly the Vine and we are the branches that are growing because we are in Him. And such things happen because His Father, the Vine-grower, tends and prunes us branches so that we can truly bear miraculous fruit in our lives.

Now, the thing about grape vines is that they don't produce grapes instantly. That's not rocket science. But the fact is the vine has to grow for several years before the branches bring forth fruit. And that was certainly my experience when it came to learning how to preach in the seminary – years of work brought forth homilies now that usually keep most people awake. But in order for any grape vine to grow in the first place, it has to be nourished, of course. It has to get the minerals and nutrients it needs from the soil.

So, when it comes to our spiritual lives as the branches on the Vine that we are, what is one of the most important sources of nourishment for us? And, what is an essential way for Jesus to remain in us so that we can remain in Him? Well, today 14 children of our parish celebrate their first Holy Communion – what a very special event for all of them and for their families and for our entire parish. It's in the Eucharist that another transforming miracle takes place right before our very eyes here at Mass! The wine that is offered here is the fruit of the vine and work of human hands. It truly becomes our spiritual drink, which is the precious Blood of Christ. And the bread that is offered here is the fruit of the earth and work of human hands. It truly becomes for us the Bread of Life, which is the sacred Body of Christ.

My friends, Jesus nourishes us with the gift of His very self. He comes to dwell within our bodies and souls through Holy Communion so that we can truly live in Him. And by living in Him, we grow, year by year, enabled to bear fruit that will last for eternal life. Now that's Good News! God bless you.