

## Fifth Sunday - Easter - Cycle C – 2007

Deacon Ron Tocci

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A man is having a dream...In his dream, he is on trial...The judge pounds the gavel to get silence in the courtroom ... "Madam foreman has the jury reached a verdict?" ... "Yes we have your honor. We the jury find the defendant NOT GUILTY." At the sound of these words, the man suddenly awakens, his head and his pillow soaked with perspiration, "Whew, that dream was too real....I thought I was on trial for my life. Man was I relieved to hear those words 'NOT GUILTY'."...Then, just as suddenly, the man's feeling of relief changes to sadness as he recalls what he had been on trial for: in his dream, he had been on trial for being a Christian ... and they hadn't found enough evidence to convict him ... If you or I were arrested for being a Christian, would they have enough evidence to convict us?

There are places in the world where this actually happens - people get persecuted because they believe in Jesus Christ....It'll probably never happen to us, but it does raise an important question: How do you identify a Christian? What are the evidences that someone is a Christian? I suppose we could start with some obvious things, like being a member of a church, owning a Bible, going to Mass, celebrating the Sacraments, wearing a cross....These are all good things, but - in the language of the courtroom – none of these are proof beyond a reasonable doubt that one is a Christian.... In today's Gospel, Jesus gives us the acid test, the distinguishing mark of a Christian when he tells his followers, "This is how all will know you are my disciples, by your love for one another." ... Jesus makes it very, very clear. ...We can't legitimately call ourselves Christians unless we are committed to being loving persons - THAT'S IT. CASE CLOSED!

Now it's important to understand that here Jesus was talking to His followers about how they were to treat **one another**...He wasn't talking about how they should love their neighbors or their enemies, or those who are different, or those who are outcasts...He had already told them that many times before...Here He was commanding His disciples - the 1<sup>st</sup> Christians - to love **one another**. ...All followers of Christ must love one another... that was to be their trademark...the characteristic that identified them as belonging to Him...Because Jesus knew that sometimes it's easier to love people you see only rarely or not at all, people you really don't have a relationship with, than it is to love people you are close to or spend a lot of time with...And then Jesus told them the kind of love He wanted to see: "As I have loved you, so must your love be for each other." ...To be his follower - to be a Christian - we must love one another as he has loved us...

Now that's a pretty tough commandment...because we know how Jesus loves us...He loves us with a foot-washing, give-my-life-for-you kind of love...A love that in no way depends on whether or not we deserve it...He doesn't love us only as long as we are good. His love is unconditional - nothing required on our part - and that's good for us because there are times when we are just not very lovable. When we mess up, when we fail, no matter how much or how often we let Jesus down, we know his understanding and forgiveness are always there...And that's how He wants us to be with one another.

That's a tall order...Anytime you get a group of people together, there will be disagreements; there will be frictions; there will be personality clashes; there will be problems. That's the way it is everywhere: in families, in our neighborhoods, the workplace, in school, on sports teams, ....even in the church... Some people want to do it this way, and others want to do it that way. Some people want to place the emphasis here, and others want to place it there. Some people are very sensitive and have to be handled with kid gloves. Some people just drive other people crazy...

We all know who they are: the annoying next door neighbor whose lawn mower wakes you up every Saturday morning... that boss (or teacher or coach) who won't stop making your life miserable ...that sister-in-law whose politics make your blood boil...that back-stabbing so-called good friend. ....those bullies at school or on the school bus...that obnoxious know-it-all who works in your office...The jerk who cuts you off in the church parking lot...All of us can add to this list of hard-to-love people...And who knows whose list we might be on.

So, how can Jesus come into an environment like that and command us to love one another? How can He make me **feel** any love or affection for people I don't even like? ....Ah, there's the key!...Jesus isn't telling us how to feel; He's telling us how to **act**...For Jesus, love never has to do with how we feel about someone; it has to do with how we act toward them... He doesn't expect us to have warm, fuzzy feelings for everyone....But he does care about what we DO to one another and therein lies the meaning of Christian love...It is a conscious decision to do good for another person, and it's completely in our control....It's not like the love between a boy and a girl looking longingly into each other's eyes on a moon-lit night, or parents seeing their baby for the first time and the little one just steals their hearts....These are examples of wonderful, emotional love experiences that just happen to us, that are **not** in our control...

The love Jesus commands from His followers is a love we **can** control...When there is someone who rubs us the wrong way, who gets under our skin, we decide to try to understand at least some of what makes them tick, what makes them the way they are...When someone has done us wrong, or betrayed us, we decide to take the first step to reconcile,...to forgive...to work things out. ...When someone does something to hurt us, or continually acts against us,...we choose to pray for them...to ask God to help them change what it is that makes them do what they do...This is how Jesus wants His followers to love one another...This is how we who say we are Christians, who say we are members of this Church,...who say we believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, are commanded to love one another...This is how the world knows we belong to Jesus Christ, know we are HIS.

My friends, one of the things that draws people to our Church, to our faith, – whether they are non-Catholics or fallen-away Catholics – is what they see in how we treat one another... We have our differences, we have our problems,..but when they see how we love one another, forgive one another, pray for one another, try to understand one another, people see Christ in us...They see the kind of people we are because we follow Christ and it makes them want the same thing...it makes them want to love and follow Christ too.

This morning we have FOUR special young people with us..who have grown up in our parish. ....They have been watching us,... they have noticed when we have followed Jesus and when we have not. ... We hope we have given them good examples of how to love one another as Jesus has loved us... We hope we have been good models for them...Today Tom Elman, Linh Lay, Emily Vanderbilt and Joshua Vanderbilt will be celebrating their 1<sup>st</sup> Comm...(ask them to

*stand* )...They will be receiving the Body and Blood of Christ for the 1<sup>st</sup> time...Tom, Linh, Emily, Joshua, all of us here can tell you that living as Jesus wants us to, loving one another as He wants us to,...can be very hard to do...But God has given us this wonderful Sacrament to help us...this food from heaven to feed us and strengthen us for our spiritual life just like regular food strengthens us for our physical life.

Today you will experience for the 1<sup>st</sup> time what most of us have experienced many times...You will experience Jesus Christ becoming part of you. ...Jesus Christ strengthening you...to live as He wants you to live...to go out in the world and show the world that you belong to Him...Our prayers and our blessings are with you and your families as you join us at the Lord's table...And we look forward to your 2<sup>nd</sup> communion, your 3<sup>rd</sup> communion and 4<sup>th</sup> communion....and every communion after that in all the days ahead. AMEN.