

Homily for the 5th Sunday of Easter

May 1-2, 2021

Readings: Acts 9: 26-31; 1 John 3: 18-24; John 15: 1-8

Preacher: Cathy Kamp

As we continue to reflect on the impact of the coronavirus on our lives, our faith and our ministries, the Fifth Sunday of Easter gifts us with Saul, the first letter of John, and Jesus' discourse on the vine and the branches. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower," said Jesus in the 15th chapter of the Gospel of John. "He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and every one that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit."

In the past 14 months, we have each experienced our share of pruning. We adjusted to life without regular family visits; work at home without the camaraderie of co-workers; and Church without the comforting hum of in-person ministerial activity. Even as we come back to Mass in-person, masks on, it is not worship-as-usual. We are told where to sit and how to receive Holy Communion. Mass is hardly over and someone is spraying down pews. There are no coffee hours, no Liturgy of the Word for Children, no gatherings.

So what are we to learn from all this? Like Saul, did we need dramatic pruning so that we could speak more boldly the name of Jesus? Did we need this time of quiet reflection to learn, as we hear in 1 John 3, that God is greater even than our hearts and knows everything, even that which is deep within our hearts? Did we need this time to recognize that we can only bear fruit in our lives when we commit ourselves to remaining with and in Jesus?

Throughout the COVID-19 experience, those of us blessed to continue our parish ministry have witnessed over and over again, just how this experience has influenced the faithful and those struggling with faith. Let's face it. Our Catholic Church has been struggling for some time to bring the faithful back to Church and to engage people more fully in living their faith. It just may have taken a pandemic to teach us to see that there are other ways of reaching people beyond ministry-as-usual.

Two years ago, who would have believed that people would faithfully show up to participate in the liturgy online—on their laptops and tablets, on websites, on YouTube, on Facebook of all things! I would not have believed that communities of faith could take shape virtually. But like Saul’s dramatic conversion, I have seen the light! People from multiple parishes, from places near and far, gather for Mass, for prayer services, for the Rosary on Facebook! And they talk to each other through typed comments. They pray for each other. They offer each other peace. They bolster each other up. They share their faith with those who are hurting or tentative. Online communities of faith have formed, have been nurtured, and continue to bear fruit.

I am a great believer in the value of small Christian communities for the purpose of learning in faith—whether Bible studies or book groups or ministry teams or RCIA. But on Zoom? It hardly seems possible. Yet in the past year, I have seen people who are longing for meaningful activity flock to webinars and ChristLife and other ways to share faith online. There is some sort of goodness in “visiting” with each other in our own living rooms. Is this another form of pruning? Do we need to be open to the unexpected ways people can “gather” when they cannot be out and about together? This seems to have application far beyond the pandemic as we strive to include young parents who may not have childcare or older adults who do not drive at night or in bad weather. The opportunities are as many as we can imagine, as many as we open our minds and hearts to see.

As we re-imagine the life of the parish and other communities of faith, it is time once again to fling open the windows. Going back to the ways we have always done it would be a tragic missed opportunity to renew the ministry of the Church. Sharing faith and praying together can come in many creative modalities. There is only one thing that matters, and that’s what Jesus teaches us in today’s Gospel. All of our outreach must assist the faithful in bearing fruit for Jesus. We need only keep the focus on remaining in Him. “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

