

Sunday, May 19, 2019

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Meditation and Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

Mass Readings:

1st Reading: Acts 14:21-27

2nd Reading: Revelation 21:1-5

Responsorial: Psalm 145:8-13

Gospel: John 13:31-35

What Does It Mean to Love One Another as Jesus Has Loved Us?

Love . . . one another. (John 13:34)

That seems pretty easy, doesn't it? Be nice, take care of the people you're close to, maybe give some money to the poor. But is this all that Jesus means? Or does he have a different idea? Let's look at the context of this command to get some idea.

Jesus has just washed his disciples' feet, and Judas has left on his mission to betray him. Jesus knows he will not be with his friends much longer as the cross begins to loom large in his mind. So when he tells his disciples to love one another as he loved them, he is calling them to a love that mirrors his own love—a love that is selfless and sacrificial, a love that flows from God's unconditional love for each person on earth.

This way of loving would set apart Jesus' followers because it is so different from the way most people think of love. Jesus' love washed the feet of his betrayer. It forgave those who nailed him to the cross. It reached across cultural lines to embrace Samaritans and Gentiles. It extended healing to the marginalized and political rivals.

It's this kind of love that won people over in the first century: they saw believers caring for outcasts like widows and orphans and holding their possessions in common. But it has also won people over throughout history: people saw Christians nursing plague victims in the Middle Ages, believers risking their safety to hide Jews during World War II, and more recently, Pope St. John Paul II forgiving the man who shot him.

Awe for the saints who loved like this might make you think it's impossible for you, but this call to love isn't just for the saints. Jesus has touched your life, and he lives in you, just as he did the saints. How did they do it? They experienced Jesus' love firsthand, and it changed the way they loved the people around them. That very same thing can happen to you.

"Today, Jesus, teach me to love as you love."

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Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion:

1. The first reading begins with these words: *After Paul and Barnabas had proclaimed the good news to that city and made a considerable number of disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch. They strengthened the spirits of the disciples and exhorted them to persevere in the faith, saying, "It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." They appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, commended them to the Lord in whom they had put their faith.*
 - Why do you think Paul and Barnabas returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch and strengthened the spirits of the disciples and exhorted them to persevere in the faith?
 - How are we, like Paul and Barnabas, also called to do the same with members of our parish and other brothers and sisters in Christ? How would you describe the ways you do this? Is there room for improvement? How?
 - Are you willing to pray and fast, as Paul and Barnabas did, for the leaders in the Church, your parish, and other leaders? What concrete steps can you take to better support them in their work?
2. The responsorial psalm opens with these words: *The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness. The LORD is good to all and compassionate toward all his works.*
 - What do these words mean to you? How have you personally experienced these wonderful graces in your life?
 - What are the ways you demonstrate your appreciation to God for his graciousness, mercy, and kindness?
3. The second reading begins as follows: *Then I, John, a new heaven and a new earth. The former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I also saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, God's dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them as their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, for the old order has passed away."*
 - How does St. John's vision of the new heaven and a new earth match your own vision of heaven?
 - The reading ends with these words: *The One who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new."* What steps can you take to allow God to replace old patterns of thinking and behavior with "new" patterns?
4. In the Gospel reading, Jesus spoke these words to his disciples on the night before he died: *Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and God will glorify him at once. My children, I will be with you only a little while longer. I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*
 - What do you think Jesus meant when he said, *Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him*? In what ways did this occur through his cross and resurrection?
 - In what way does Jesus' new commandment to love one another as he has loved us raise the commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" to an even higher level? Why do you think it is also a sign that we are Jesus' disciples?
5. The meditation is a reflection on these words of Jesus: *Love . . . one another.* It begins with these words: *That seems pretty easy, doesn't it? Be nice, take care of the people you're close to, maybe give some money to the poor. But is this all that Jesus means? Or does he have a different idea?* It goes on to say that *when he tells his disciples to love one another as he loved them, he is calling them to a love that mirrors his own love—a love that is selfless and sacrificial, a love that flows from God's unconditional love for each person on earth.* It ends with these words: *Jesus has touched your life, and he lives in you, just as he did the saints. How did they do it? They experienced Jesus' love firsthand, and it changed the way they loved the people around them. That very same thing can happen to you.*
 - Why do you think Jesus' words meant more than just to *Be nice, take care of the people you're close to, maybe give some money to the poor*?
 - Why is Jesus' commandment to "love others as he has loved us" impossible to fulfill unless we have first experienced Jesus' love for us? (See 1 John 4:19: "We love because he first loved us.")
 - Are there any members of your family to whom you have a hard time loving them with *a love that flows from God's unconditional love*? What steps can you take to say yes to Jesus' commandment to love them as he has loved you?

Take some time now to pray and ask the Lord to give you a greater experience of his great love for you, so you can give it away to others. Use the prayer below from the end of the meditation as a starting point.

"Today, Jesus, teach me to love as you love."

[The discussion questions were created by Maurice Blumberg, who is currently a member of the board of directors of the ChristLife Catholic Ministry for Evangelization (www.christlife.org), a member of the National Service Committee Council of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (www.nsc-chariscenter.org), and a board member of The Love of Christ Foundation. Prior to this, Maurice was the founding executive director of the National fellowship of Catholic Men, a chairman of the board of The Word Among Us (www.wau.org), and a director of partner relations for The Word Among Us Partners ministry. He can be contacted at mblumberg@wau.org or mblumberg@aol.com.]