

5th Sunday of Easter
(Acts 9:26-31; 1 Jn 3:18-24; John 15:1-8)

The gospels show that Jesus loved to teach in parables. Matthew even says, "All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables. He spoke nothing to them except in parables." In John, however, Jesus usually speaks in allegory and the word "parable" doesn't appear. A parable is a simple story which contains a message. According to Aristotle, a story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. As an example, Luke has a parable of the Good Shepherd. A man has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray (beginning); he goes in search of it and finds it and brings it home (middle); he calls his friends and neighbors to rejoice with him (end).

John *also* has a passage on the Good Shepherd, as we heard last Sunday, *but* that is an allegory, not a parable. Allegory is defined as a prolonged metaphor in which a series of actions are symbolic of other actions, while characters are often personifications.

Jesus, in last Sunday's gospel, doesn't tell a story; He paints a picture. Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd," so we are not left to guess who Good Shepherd represents. Each of the elements has a symbolic meaning: gate, the sheepfold, hearing the voice, the other sheep, the one sheepfold.

In today's gospel, like last Sunday's of the Good Shepherd, what Jesus says of the vine does not tell a story but paints a picture. The symbolic meaning of each element is fairly clear and needs little explanation. Again Jesus identifies Himself as the "true vine," so we know at once what the vine symbolizes; His Father, He tells us, is the "vinedresser." Each of us is a branch. The lectionary translation has "he prunes," that is, "trims," for the farmer's action. **A**To prune@ is, indeed, the proper term for what one does to make the vine more fruitful, but the Greek here actually has Jesus saying "he cleanses." Jesus says, "you are already cleansed," and this makes us think of the foot washing at the last supper, when Jesus pronounces His disciples to be clean (all except Judas). (The lectionary's phrase **A**you are pruned" is neither accurate nor does it make good sense here.)

It is easy to grasp that each branch is sustained by and draws nourishment from the vine, so we understand the conclusion, "without me you can do nothing." Likewise, it is not difficult to assign a meaning to the branches cut off and withered and cast into the fire to burn.

It seems to me that this allegory has much in common with Jesus' "Bread of Life" discourse in chapter 6 of John's gospel. Both express the same truth, but in different ways, one symbolically, the other in more concrete terms; but both suggest nourishment from Jesus; He says that unless the branch remains united to the vine, it will have no nourishment ("without me you can do nothing"), so likewise "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you." In chapter 6 He says further, "whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him"; today, as the true vine, He says, "Remain in me, as I remain in you."

The allegory of the vine can help us understand and appreciate the Eucharist and the Mass. Our dependence on Jesus and His grace is constant, just as the health of branch on the vine is constant. Jesus' union with us through Mass and Eucharist is not momentary, only during the action itself, for He says, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him."

Twice in today's gospel Jesus makes reference to bearing much fruit: first, He says that in order to bear much fruit the disciple must remain in Him; and at the end Jesus says that the Father is glorified by the disciple bearing much fruit. But the allegory does not make clear is what Jesus means when He speaks of **A**bearing much fruit." We can note that right after Jesus says: "It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you to go and bear fruit that will remain.@ And immediately, **A**This I command you: love one another." I think the close sequence of "bearing fruit" and "loving one another" suggests a connection. Jesus has given us His new commandment, and nine times in the Johannine literature it is repeated: "love one another," sometimes with the addition, "as I have loved you." However, there is another place in John where there is reference to "bearing much fruit." Referring to His passion and death, He says, "Unless the grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit." Jesus=s suffering and death are the supreme example of unselfish love, and He indicates something of the sort of love we must have in order "to bear much fruit." **A**Love@ is not simply a feeling, an emotion but something concrete, a willingness to help others even with some cost to oneself.

There is a story I have used in a homily once before, but it is meaningful and relevant here; it is worth telling again. When John was very old and had to be carried in the arms of his disciples, we are told, his message was always, "Little children, love one another." His disciples, tired of hearing the same thing over and over again, asked why he always said that. The reply was, "It was His commandment; and if you do that, nothing else is needed."