

Homily for May 2, 2010 (5th Sunday of Easter)
Acts 14:21-27; Ps 145 (vv); Rev 21:1-5a; John 13:31-33, 34-35

The great author Franz Kafka (d. 1924), a Czech Jew who wrote German language classics like *The Trial*, was walking down the street one day and came upon a little girl who was crying because she had lost her doll. Moved by her tears, he told her that he had only recently seen the doll. He added that although the doll had gone away she promised to write the little girl and stay in touch.

Over the next several weeks, the girl received a number of letters in which the doll described in wonderful detail all the adventures and experiences she was having around the world. The girl didn't know, of course, that it was Kafka who was really writing the letters. There was something else that she didn't know: he did so even while tuberculosis was steadily consuming his body and his energy. He continued to write the letters until the TB finally took his life.

Love spoken is sweet; but love in action is even more powerful.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus gives his disciples "a new commandment: love one another." Then he adds an important qualifier: "*As I have loved you, so you also should love on another.*" Finally, he goes even further by stating that the thing that will most identify them as his disciples is not obeying the rules, remembering the right prayers, tithing, fasting, or even a willingness to be a martyr (though all of these are important) but rather very simply: *love*.

It is a love revealed in the most humble as well as the most dramatic gestures. Recall that Jesus spoke these words to his disciples during the Last Supper and on the eve of his passion and death, when he would show the greatest love in laying down his life for his friends (John 15:13). It is also important to remember that he spoke these words not long after he revealed his love to his disciples in another way: by washing their feet (John 13:1-20).

L-O-V-E can be written in small letters as well as big ones.

We see another example of love writ large in our second reading, where John witnessed "a new heavens and a new earth" rising from the distress and destruction of what had been. Writing to a church beset by a series of periodic but savage persecutions by an earthly kingdom and emperors who demanded that others worship them as gods, he gave them a hopeful vision of a world in which God would dwell with humanity and end "the old order" suffering and pain. The reign of God—the reign of love—would replace the reign of Caesar.

We are, of course, waiting for that day to come to its fulfillment. In the meantime there are many ways in which we can cooperate with God's grace in making the reign of love more real. In the wake of Christ's passion, death, resurrection and ascension, the early church came to appreciate the power and value of the more ordinary but very necessary gestures of love.

Our first reading recounts the building up of the local church through seemingly routine but nonetheless important actions by the disciples: (1) evangelization and encouragement; (2) following up and ensuring continuity

through the discernment and appointment of elders or presbyters; and (3) accountability and witness for the ministry.

Having just finished proclaiming the gospel in Derbe and making a new group of believers, Paul and Barnabas then returned to places that they had already been—Lystra, Iconium and Antioch—where “[t]hey strengthened the spirits of the disciples and exhorted them to persevere in the faith...” Evangelizing and helping people to develop a relationship with Christ and join the church are great; but it is also important to follow up and check in.

One of the high points of life in many parishes is to see a group of adults, teens and older children receive the Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist). In other parishes, it is when dozens of teens are confirmed by a local bishop and complete their Christian initiation. Unfortunately, studies have also shown that a significant number of these initiates drop out of parish life or church within a year after receiving their sacraments.

The most common cause has little to do with boredom, conflict or even scandal. Too often it is simply a matter of inattention and neglect. As Paul and Barnabas demonstrated so well in Acts 14 and as we know from our own experiences of marriage, family life and even business, relationships need nurturing in order to last. Similarly, the period of *Mystagogia* (Greek for “education in the mysteries”) is critical to helping those who have just received the sacraments to deepen and solidify their understanding and practice of our faith. It can easily get lost in post-Easter fatigue, First Communion preparations, etc.

Just as we need to encourage and solidify our faith individually, we also need to do so communally. Noticing the rapid growth of the church and realizing that they could not be everywhere at the same time, Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, commended them to the Lord in whom they had put their faith.” The Greek word for elder is *presbyteros*, i.e., presbyter. Through centuries of development, this ministry of presbyter eventually evolved into what we in the Roman Catholic tradition now know as the priesthood.

This is the Year of the Priest in the Church. In many places, it is a year of special celebrations to honor and reflect on this vocation, witness and ministry. But given the horrible news that we have lately seen about the misconduct of (some) priests and bishops, perhaps the greatest gift that we can give is that of Paul and Barnabas: to pray for our priests and commend them to the Lord.

At the same time, Paul and Barnabas also demonstrated the importance of accountability. Upon arriving at Antioch, “they called the church together and reported what God had done with them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.” We hear a lot these days about accountability in terms of oversight, reporting, arrests, resignations and removals from office. Perhaps it would also be good to also hear more about what God has done with us and all the doors that he, in his grace, has opened for us and for others. +