

5th Sunday of Easter – C

When we think of a last will and testament, we usually think of the legal document that people write up in which they say to whom they want their possessions to go after they die. So-and-so gets the silverware, so-and-so gets the stamp collection, and so on. But the “testament” part of the “last will and testament” was originally meant to be a sort of final message from the deceased person to the heirs.

In Scripture there are examples of people giving their testament or their final message to their loved ones before they will be separated by death: one example is in Genesis 49 when Jacob gives his last words to his sons. And our Gospel reading today is another example of this: it is an excerpt from Jesus’ final message to his twelve apostles. He said these words at the Last Supper, when they were gathered for the last time before he died on the

cross. He intended these final words to convey a most important message, one that He especially wants them to remember.

Interestingly, Jesus says, “Now is the Son of Man glorified.” Jesus knows that he is going to his death the very next day, and yet he says that he is going to be glorified. Suffering and dying: that sounds like the opposite of how we imagine glory. But for Jesus, his greatest glory is found in this act of total obedience to his Father, giving up his life for humanity. And this act of obedience that Jesus makes – this total gift of himself on the cross – is also the greatest expression of his love, for his Father in heaven and for us.

But then Jesus goes on also to give his apostles a new commandment, the supreme commandment, which both contains and is greater than all the other commandments: love one another. He goes on to explain what that love is supposed to be like: “As I have loved you, so you also should love one another.” This is Jesus’

final message to his apostles, with whom he has spent the last three years. And as such it is supposed to convey a message that Jesus particularly wants them to remember. He wants them to love one another, and lest they wonder how they are to do that, he adds that he wants them to love each other as he has loved them. And how has he loved them? They will soon see: all the way to giving up his life on the cross.

Why do we hear this Gospel now at this point in the Easter season, these words of Jesus to his apostles that he spoke at the Last Supper the night before he died? It is because the feast of the Ascension is approaching, which is of course when Jesus rose into heaven and was again separated from his disciples. This message is also given by Jesus to the whole Church. It is like a final testament from Jesus to his Church because he also knew that he was going to ascend into heaven, and that he would not be present to us here on earth in quite the same way as before. And as this message is

intended for the whole Church, that means it is also meant for us. Jesus calls us too to love one another, and lest we wonder how we are to do that, he clarifies it by saying, “As I have loved you, so you also should love one another.”

And, Jesus tells us, this is how people will know that we are his disciples: by the love we show to each other. As Christians, we are part of a big community or a big family. And every community, every society, every family has its squabbles and its problems. In spite of the challenges of living within any kind of community, we are still supposed to love one another. And to love one another as Jesus loves us. What does that mean? As Jesus gave up his life for us on the cross, so we too are to give up our lives for others. In other words, self-sacrificial love.

Remember, our lives are not our own. They are a gift from God, and they belong to God, and he desires that we use them in

service to each other. We all know that the opposite of love of course is hate. But I would say the opposite of love is more than that. I would add to it that the opposite of love is selfishness, being turned in on ourselves, focused on our own needs, our own desires, our own pleasure, our own agenda, and especially at the expense of others.

So how are we doing, living out this command of Jesus, the greatest commandment? It doesn't mean that we are supposed to have warm and fuzzy feelings about everyone; sometimes there may be people we really don't care for or want to be around. That's OK; that's not what it means to love others. We are not going to like everyone or to click with every kind of personality. However, we are called to be willing to *love* everyone – including the people we don't particularly like and don't enjoy being around – by being willing to serve them and to sacrifice for them anyway.

And that's going to look different from one person to the next depending on our state in life. For example, parents have a greater commitment to their own children; in other words, they shouldn't neglect their own children and go off on missions to serve others. Charles Dickens wrote a novel called *Bleak House*, one of my favorites, which includes a character named Mrs. Jellyby. She had lots of children, but she neglected them because she was so focused on raising money for orphans in Africa. That's not what Jesus is asking. Parents' first responsibility is to their own family, but it should not be their only responsibility. It's possible to be so focused on one's own family that we ignore one's Christian duty to love and serve people outside of one's own family.

We also have a responsibility to our extended family, to our parish community, our whole Church. In fact, just as Jesus died for all, there is no one who we can consider to be outside the scope of those whom we are supposed to love. But there is an appropriate

order of responsibility: our families, our parish, our community, our world. If we truly show self-sacrificial love for each other, that will be the greatest sign to others that we are Jesus' disciples.

And just as Jesus himself suffered in this life and went to the cross out of love for us, so too can we expect some suffering. Sacrificing ourselves for others will at times involve suffering and denying ourselves for the sake of others. Sometimes, like Christ, and like Paul and Barnabas in our first reading, we will be rejected by others; we will suffer for what we believe and for trying to live out what we believe. But this suffering is not meaningless. As St. Paul tells us, "It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God." Paul himself when he is saying these words has just been stoned and somehow survived, so he definitely knows what he is talking about. It's not always going to be easy; there will be pain and suffering, trials and tribulations. But there is hope: the Kingdom of God awaits us. And if we are faithful to the

Lord, and love one another as he loves us, we have the certain hope that one day God's covenant promises to us will be fulfilled: God will make his dwelling with the human race; He will be our God, and we will be His people. "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning...." The Lord gives us the sure and certain hope that he will make all things new.

- **May 18, 2025 at St. Mary's, Spring Lake**