

5th Sunday Easter Year B

April 29, 2018

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

“...but they were all afraid of him, not believing he was a disciple.” Fear may be seen from any number of perspectives, typically beginning when we were children. That fear may have been irrational or unfounded. Fear may be of the dark, of a perceived monster in the room, perhaps fear of a teacher when you first went to school. At other times, our fear is quite justified. Perhaps you were afraid of a schoolmate with whom you had a disagreement.

In our first reading this morning, we are told that when Saul arrived in Jerusalem to try to join the other apostles, “they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple.”¹ Why were they so afraid of Saul? Clearly, they feared his past, a past of which they were all too aware. Recall, Saul had breathed many threats against Christians, he was a persecutor whose reputation was known to all.

So I think you can imagine that the disciples would have been most unnerved to discover that Saul was now among them, seeking to join their company. They did not believe that his conversion was authentic; perhaps they thought it was a trap. Sometimes, we are more comfortable in keeping people at a comfortable distance in a way in which we have them pegged.

We classify, categorize and fit people into neat boxes. Perhaps it helps us to organize our world. But it leaves absolutely no room for growth, for change, much less for radical conversion. We are at a disadvantage today because our reference point is Saint Paul, not the Saul before his conversion.

We are scared of people who are different, whom we do not trust, whether or not we have any legitimate reasons for this mistrust. But

¹ From the New American Bible footnotes: “At first he found himself in the position of being regarded as an apostate by the Jews and suspect by the Christian community of Jerusalem. His acceptance by the latter was finally brought about through his friendship with Barnabas.”

in truth, the disciples were incapable of seeing the power of God's grace. We have no right to stifle the Spirit of God as he works in the world, and in the lives of others.

One of the great joys of the priesthood is seeing God's grace work in people's lives, sometimes in marvelous ways. It appears as if the disciples were not ready to admit that Saul had changed. The Paul who stood before them they were not ready to trust. He had to prove himself, I suspect many times over before they relented.

We ought never to give up on others, for to do so is to sadden the Holy Spirit, whose influence is never lacking, and whose grace is never withheld from those who sincerely seek it. But it is not only a question of an individual being open to grace. What is our responsibility to accompany, to walk with those who may be struggling, to reach out to those who are trying to make a change?

I have been continually surprised by how the Lord works in others. You might be amazed how many devout and active Catholics have had periods in their lives in which they were neither. I have heard numerous times, "Fr. if you knew me fifteen years ago, had you encountered me in college, if you had been my teacher in high school- trust me, I would not have been one of your favorites."

Today's reading ends on a good note, that the Church was at peace. Despite the clear evidence of missteps and personality conflicts, the early Church experienced rapid growth, this is true. And eventually, through his friendship with Barnabas, others came to trust Paul and he dedicated his life to his missionary journeys and prolific writing.

One final point. Sometimes others have indeed changed, but we have not. We are blinded from seeing the change and insist on holding on to our bias towards them, hardening our own hearts to their goodness. We must recognize this for what it - a sinful form of judgmentalism that sees only the speck in another's eye, failing to see the plank in our own.

True to the nature of the Easter season, let us be mindful of the power of the Risen Lord to transform hearts. May we never give up on the promptings of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those whom we love, or worse yet, visibly show that we have written them off completely. We too have a duty to witness to God's transformative grace, both in our own lives and those around us.