

FIRST READING: Acts of the Apostles 4:32-35

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles:

The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common. With great power the apostles bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great favor was accorded them all. There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, his love is everlasting.

Let the house of Israel say, "His mercy endures forever." Let the house of Aaron say, "His mercy endures forever." Let those who fear the LORD say, "His mercy endures forever."

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, his love is everlasting.

I was hard pressed and was falling, but the LORD helped me. My strength and my courage is the LORD, and he has been my savior. The joyful shout of victory in the tents of the just:

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, his love is everlasting.

The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. By the LORD has this been done; it is wonderful in our eyes. This is the day the LORD has made; let us be glad and rejoice in it.

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, his love is everlasting.

SECOND READING: Saint John 5:1-6

A reading from the first Letter of Saint John:

Beloved: Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is begotten by God, and everyone who loves the Father loves also the one begotten by him. In this way we know that we love the children of God when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whoever is begotten by God conquers the world. And the victory that conquers the world is our faith. Who indeed is the victor over the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? This is the one who came through water and blood, Jesus Christ, not by water alone, but by water and blood. The Spirit is the one that testifies, and the Spirit is truth.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: John 20:19-31

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John:

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained." Thomas, called Didymus, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples said to him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." Now a week later his disciples were again inside and Thomas was with them. Jesus came, although the doors were locked, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe." Thomas answered and said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the Octave of Easter

"The community of believers was of one heart and mind." Each time I read this passage, I ask the question, "For how long, fifteen minutes?" Rarely have I belonged to or served in a community of one mind and heart. There are many things that can divide us as people. Our politics, ethnicity and first language can be stumbling blocks to unity. Whether we root for the Sox, Cubs or neither can start fights. Often there has been discontent. In today's reading we hear the possibility of true witness to faith in Jesus. Unity and harmony are possible; only in Jesus.

The Church as an institution has rarely lived up to its promise. How many Christian denominations are there? My paternal grandfather became Catholic before he married my grandmother. His Methodist family disinherited him for that. Only his sister and her husband kept in contact. He, however, did not make a complete conversion either. At his wake, my grandmother was horrified when his Protestant Masonic brethren arrived, in uniform. They were horrified to see a crucifix above his casket. I have always felt this to be a great scandal. Christ founded but one Church and we, his membership, have divided it and proudly proclaim the division as our identity.

In the past year much has divided us as human beings. Pandemic, prejudice and politics have been the main ones. The pandemic has imposed social distancing out of necessity to slow the spread of what is a contagious and potentially deadly disease. Each time, like now, we have let

our guard down to try to resume life as it once was, we have paid the price as the virus resurges. Our best qualities have become our curse. Politics, as I first learned, is the art of what is possible. We have made it an impasse; and now the divide of our politics seems unbridgeable. It has become deadlocked in point of view. Prejudice keeps various ethnicities at bay and apart. Some are seen as more or less desirable.

I have heard it said that points of view, politics and ethnicity are like bowel movements. We all have them. There is only one Human Race, created in God's love, image and likeness. What we have added to the mix cannot eclipse the infinite, eternal and unconditional love of God. Each human person is an intimate and beloved child of God and likewise a brother or sister of Jesus. The human race is more closely related to one another than some endangered species. We have a greater diversity of personality and culture than we do genetically. All of us have our human origins in Eastern Africa. The Garden of Eden was Africa's savannah. Our skin shade, eye shape and hair are adaptations to the environments into which our ancestors migrated millennia ago. Diversity is a gift if we take the time to acknowledge it.

We also have faith in Jesus. Our challenge comes from how we live it. How is our behavior as faithful followers of Jesus different from those who are not? Do we strive to recognize the presence of God in those we meet? Certainly we do with family, neighbors and friends. The gospel challenges us to greater depths. Non-believers love their own too. Jesus has told us to love our enemies and to pray for those who hurt us. We don't have to like people by Jesus command; we must love them. What does that mean? We can seek in them God's loving presence. As God's sons and daughters, God is there. Treat others as you, yourself, wish to be treated; with respect and compassion. We are all fellow travelers through this life. We only live it once, like everyone else. In faith, we live it by God's good grace and rely on God's mercy when we fail. Only with God's grace can we succeed. When each of us meets the limits of our human nature, we can rely on God's nature to give us what we lack. In turning to God for forgiveness, we will find what we need to try again. Healing is possible without a cure. Human nature has remained the same even as the Spirit of God lives in us.

Acts and First John, today, speak of the witness that believers offer as they lived faithful lives. We are witnesses not to our goodness, for each of us is a sinner. We witness to the goodness of God. We show what God has done for us. We are all alive and breathing. We believe and know God. We strive to deepen our faith and commitment to living it. We have a share in the infinite, eternal and unconditional life of God. I like to point out that God works in God's own time. We seek to do God's will. In seeking, we discover the means. Our desire to seek is God's gift to us. I may be a sinner, always in need of God's mercy, but all of the rest of what I've just written is true too. Perfection can only be found in God. We are on a journey through this life to God. The journey does not end in our deaths either. Paradise is not our goal. Our journey will finally end when Jesus returns. The Kingdom of God is our goal.

Poor Thomas, he's gotten a bad name, the doubter. Doubting Thomas has become the paradigm for those who can never become true believers. Thomas gave his ultimatum, "I will never believe unless I stick my fingers into the holes in his hands and my hand into the wound in his side!" We never witness, in text, if he fulfilled his plan. Jesus told him to do so, but Thomas' response to Jesus' offer was to say, "My Lord and my God!" The faith came regardless

of Thomas' actions, in Jesus time and not his. Thomas became a believer and we, as readers, have been witnesses.

What are doubts? These days, people seem to doubt facts. Truth seems, today, to be a bit more elastic. This is important as we face what we do not see. I know that one and one make two. I can count it and see it on my fingers. I cannot dispute or deny the math. What of God? No one, at least these days, has seen Jesus. There is a difference between knowing facts and believing through faith.

I had an old BB King album, "Indianola Mississippi Seeds." King was born near Indianola, MS. There's a song on his album that has these lyrics, "Nobody loves me but my mother, but she may be jiving too." As we never see God, we never see love either, yet we know and experience love. We love our favorite foods. We love our country. We love our friends. We love our families. We love our spouse. We know the subtleties and nuances of love too. Love of pizza is not the same as love of a spouse. When someone says or we say, I love you, the one who hears those words must trust or have faith in the one who says them. To believe in God is a leap of faith. We trust what we hear as true. There is no empirical evidence of any of our faith to be true. We hope and trust in Jesus promise of eternal life.

One and one will always add up to two. We don't believe it; we know it as a fact. Trusting in those we love and trusting in God is not the same. We trust that God is a fact. Doubt is an integral part of faith. I like to use human relationships as an example. People who have never met are strangers. That changes when people meet and become acquaintances. After that, they are no longer strangers. Acquaintances who get to know one another better can become friends. Once people become friends, they are no longer acquaintances. Sometimes friends can become lovers. Once people are lovers, they are not just friends. One can never return to the previous level of relationship. We can forget people, I know I have, but we can never go back to being strangers. Friends can become enemies, not acquaintances. Lovers can become haters, or at least divorced, but rarely or never friends.

Once a person receives God's gift of faith, it never goes away. It may change; deepen or lessen. People may fall away or become deeply involved, but once gifted with faith, its changes are permanent. I find the story of Thomas' conversion to faith powerful. Here's a guy who knows what he wants and how he thinks for certain. He got god-smacked. He changed in an instant. It was Jesus' invitation, not Thomas' actions or intent that had any bearing on his receiving faith. Faith happened regardless of the strength of his position. Thomas did not seek this out. Jesus' invitation was unwanted, unbidden, unexpected and immediate. Conversion happened in Jesus' time not Thomas'. As I sit and type these words, I echo Thomas'. All I can say is, "My Lord and my God," at the wonder of what I witnessed in this story. I believe strongly amid thoughts of doubt and questions of wonder. This story is not about doubt; it's about faith. Are we much different than Believing Thomas?

We have faith and we live the mission Jesus has entrusted us.

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