

Homily based on the readings from April 28, 2024 (Acts 9.26-31; 1 John 3.18-24; John 15.1-8)

Many years ago, when I was living in Virginia, I attended a parish that was administered by the Dominicans. In other words, the pastor and the other priests were all members of the Dominican Order – more formally known as the Order of Preachers. In addition to the usual responsibilities of the priesthood, these men were also subject to the discipline of religious life. An essential aspect of that discipline is *obedience* – particularly to their superiors in the order. I remember one of the priests telling me how, as a novice Dominican, he was trained in the *art of obedience*. His novice master gave him a dead branch, stuck it in the ground, and told him to water it every day for a month. The main purpose of this exercise, of course, was to teach *humility* and *deference to authority*. There is another lesson, though, that I think is just as valuable: a branch, separated from a living tree, can never blossom or bear fruit. Even the most earnest and well-meaning gardener cannot overcome this basic rule of botany.

As we heard in today's Gospel, this principle applies directly to the lives of all Christians. Jesus himself declared that *he is the vine and we are the branches*. Any positive impact we have on the world – the good works we perform, our compassion toward our fellow brothers and sisters, our courage in the face of persecution – all of that comes from our connection with Christ himself. Relying on our own resources, we can create nothing of any lasting value. As Jesus reminds us:

Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own
unless it remains on the vine,
so neither can you unless you remain in me.

If we allow ourselves to become separated from the vitality of Jesus Christ, we will inevitably become brittle and barren:

Anyone who does not remain in me
will be thrown out like a branch and wither.

If our lives are not rooted in Christ, no force on earth can cause us to thrive and grow.

On a practical level, how can we establish this connection and how can we make sure it remains vibrant and vigorous? The simplest answer to that question comes back to the principle of obedience – in this case, obedience to our Heavenly Father. As we heard in today’s Epistle: “Those who keep his commandments remain in *him*, and he in *them*.”

What are these commandments? The answer again is quite simple:

And his commandment is this:

we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ,
and love one another just as he commanded us.

In other words, we are required to accept the Lordship of Christ over our lives and to emulate the love *he* demonstrates for every single one of our brothers and sisters.

An inevitable consequence of *belief*, if it is authentic, is *trust*. All of us are sure to be asked, at some point in our lives, to do something for the sake of Christ that makes us anxious or uncomfortable – giving witness to the Gospel in an inhospitable setting, speaking out against some evil in our society – whatever it may be. As individuals, we may or may not possess the *personal* courage to stand up for the truth. As Christians, it is our *duty* to trust the Holy Spirit to give us the words we need to say and the strength we need to say them.

There is another way – a deeper way – by which Christ unites us to *himself* and to *one another*: through the *sacraments* that he himself established. By Baptism we are all made members of Christ’s body; through the Holy Eucharist, we are bound together through the power of his self-sacrificial love. In the words of the Catechism, “[i]n Baptism we have been called to form but one body. The Eucharist fulfills this call” (1396). The sacraments convey the graces of God directly to every single one of us. To extend the biological metaphor, they serve as the circulatory system for the Body of Christ. The sacraments provide the

vital force that animates the branches of the tree, the nutrients that sustain the fruits of righteousness and love. Without the living waters of Baptism, without the saving power of his Precious Blood, we would simply be dry husks – devoid of any life or strength.

Returning briefly to the formation of Dominican priests, I doubt most of us would want to spend a month watering a dead branch – but *all* of us, I think, would benefit from such a *concrete* reminder of our *dependence* and our *interdependence*. Separated from the body, none of us can survive. We all rely on the support we receive from our brothers and sisters in Christ – their love, their prayers, their Christian witness – but, above all, every one of us relies on the saving power we experience every time we partake of the Body of Christ. In the words of Saint Augustine, when “we receive the Eucharist worthily, we *become* what we receive.” That is our goal and our destiny as Christians, as long as we have the faith, the hope, and the love to accept it.