

May 24, 2009
Seventh Sunday of Easter
Acts 1: 15-17, 20a, 20c-26
1 John 4:11-16
John 17:11b-19

Last weekend Deacon Bob talked about the joy that Jesus felt with his disciples, even as he anticipated his arrest and his death. In today's Gospel Jesus speaks of the joy which he hopes that all of his followers will share with him. What can this joy be about? How does one feel joy in the midst of suffering and confusion, and the tremendous stress that's part of our lives today?

Joy is not the same as happiness, although they are often experienced together. We can be sad, and have good reason to be sad, but still be full of joy. As Christians we can know joy because of our belief that the God of love is the foundation of our world. And, as has been said so many times, God is no remote, unreachable figure, showing up only to warn us or to scold us. God's absolute love surrounds us—always and everywhere. A parishioner recently mentioned some serious health challenges a family member was having. God didn't cause them, he said, but God is with his family member through it all.

In John's gospel Jesus is constantly talking about union with his Father. And he's constantly reassuring his friends that they too are in relationship with God, in union with the divine. Even suffering and death will not separate us from God's love. This is exactly the point of Jesus' bringing up joy on the night before his own death.

At the end of today's reading, Jesus asks God to consecrate his friends in truth. For Jesus, truth is sacred ground. But, at the risk of imitating Pontius Pilate, what, we might ask, is truth and how does it relate to joy?

There was a show on t.v. this season called “Lie to Me.” I’ve never watched it, but the premise seems to be that people seldom tell the truth, and “experts” will know when they’re lying. I don’t agree with that, but a lot of us do tell lies. Lying can be a power play, when we believe that those whom we consider “inferior” cannot handle the truth.

Normally we define truth as things that are factual and can be proven. It’s generally good to be truthful. In some cases it’s crucial.

Our Christian faith can look like a long list of truths or dogmas, which we must accept in order to be members of the church. These teachings are important and necessary in order for us to define who we are as followers of Jesus and speak to each other about God and the world.

But—when Jesus said, “consecrate them in the truth. Your word is truth,” he meant something exponentially greater than a list of dogmas. Let’s go back to Pontius Pilate. When Pilate asked, “What is truth,” we know the scene was a set-up. Truth was staring him in the face in the person of Jesus.

We call Jesus the living Word of God. Therefore, we believe that Jesus uniquely embodies God’s truth. Not just in his teachings, however. And not just in the way he lived and died. It goes deeper than that—to his essential identity. There is joy in knowing this.

So what does it mean for Jesus to say that we are consecrated in the truth? Definitions include being inducted into an office, being solemnly dedicated to a particular purpose, being made sacred or holy. How are Christians consecrated? First and foremost—through Baptism. The water and oil used in Baptism are symbols of this consecration—of our union with the truth that is God. But they are only symbols. Wise believers know that symbols can point to the truth in which we are consecrated, but they can never fully express it.

For instance, this statue of Jesus has been behind our altar for many Easter Seasons. Its function is to remind us of his resurrection. But are we actually seeing the resurrected Christ when we look at the statue? Of course not. Even the word “seeing” may be totally inadequate for how one might experience our risen Lord.

Most of the world’s religions realize that we humans cannot contain God in a box of our concepts or teachings. The Koran lists what appear to be conflicting divine characteristics. It’s their way of saying that none of our ideas about God are in any way the equivalent of God. And so none of our ideas about truth are the equivalent of the truth into which we are consecrated. The best we can do, perhaps, is to talk about God’s joyful love surrounding us. Or not talk at all.

Does this mean we can never know anything of God, that we might as well discard God’s truth as a useful idea and become agnostics or atheists? Not at all. We Christians are blessed by our faith in Jesus. When we pray to him and ask him into our lives, we are connecting with truth, however imperfectly, as he promised us we would.

We all can have fleeting moments of joy when we know we’re experiencing God’s love, as Deacon Bob did a couple of weeks ago. And, let’s not forget, we have the Eucharist, where truth and joy connect, becoming one.

Amen.