

5th Sunday Easter Year B
May 1-2, 2021

Without me you can do nothing

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

In middle school, my Catholic grade school utilized a workbook entitled “Plain English.” It contained endless exercises illustrating the rules of English grammar. Day after day, we were presented with sentences containing errors. Our task– cross out each error and replace it with the correct word, given the day’s lesson. Through endless repetition and trial and error, we learned the rules for grammar, and followed them.

There were right answers and wrong answers– no room for argument. “Roger and him helped theirselves to the cookies in the jar.” If you are interested in learning about compound personal pronouns, I’m your guy! No, “Roger and he helped themselves to the cookies in the jar.”

Today’s Gospel speaks the truth in a bold, refreshing and even radical way. I say “radical” because Jesus is speaking a truth in plain English. He does not mince words. And what does he say? “Without me you can do nothing.” That is fairly plain, wouldn’t you say? Jesus uses the image of the vine and the branches to illustrate his point. We are reminded of the necessity of staying united to Jesus, as a branch must remain on the vine.

I myself love munching on grapes, a healthy snack. Through trial and error, I have learned that it is best to leave the grapes unwashed and on the stems until right before eating them. Even removing a grape from the stem allows more bacteria in the tip which can lead to decay. Stay united as long as possible to the stem. Jesus cut to the chase, telling it like it is– “stay united to me.” You might say that this was his elevator speech, 1850 years before the first electric elevator. But **how** do we stay united?

[One key way in which we stay united to the Lord is the Holy Eucharist. We are so happy for several parishioners who are making their first Holy Communion today. We share this in common. I made my 1st Holy Communion 50 years ago, and the day still holds a special place in my heart.]

The manner in which Jesus says we should stay united involves pruning. Those who grow grapes for a living, those who produce wine for example, spend a great deal of time working in the fields to produce the most fruit. I recently read an article relating that a 112-acre vineyard employed four workers for three months of work, nine hours a day, six days a week, just to prune the vines. There are more than 1000 vines per acre.

In short, shoots from the previous year need to be cut back so that there are only about 4 or 5 little nodes or buds left on each. The fruit for this year will only grow on the new shoots that are sent forth from these nodes. You need to remove about 60-80% of the old growth. So, in using this image, Jesus was surely aware of the magnitude of the labor involved.

Of late, some have introduced machines to do the pruning. They help but cannot completely replace the handiwork of skilled pruners. The human element remains necessary, for the purpose of producing the richest fruit. How does this knowledge translate into our own spiritual lives?

If we do not see the necessity of pruning our bad habits, we will never rid ourselves of them. And if we are unwilling to put in the hard work of freeing ourselves from them, we will fail. Prayer takes work and requires consistency over an extended period of time. While attending a retreat or participating in a Rosary procession may provide an immediate boost, it is the sustained work of forming good habits- while simultaneously ridding ourselves of bad ones- that ultimately brings about lasting growth.

You have to want to be freed from a bad habit, truly want to let go of it, beg God to take it from you. In return, a bad habit must be replaced with a good one, a vice with a virtue. Commit to the Eucharist every single Sunday- just do it. Commit to the work of daily prayer. Pray the rosary each day during May. Pick something and just do it. Without the Lord, we can do nothing. Jesus speaks to us today quite plainly. The sooner we admit this, the better off we will be in the long run!