



## Christian love is active love

May 7, 1999

**Homily delivered at the baccalaureate Mass, Franciscan University of Steubenville (May 7, 1999)**

*Reading: Acts, 15:22-31*

*Gospel: John, 15:12-17*

" . . . I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should abide . . . "

When we hear today's Scripture passages for the first time, it can be hard to see why the Church puts them together. They don't seem to fit. The first reading is about resolving a doctrinal argument. The second is a beautiful — almost poetic — discourse by Jesus on the need to love one another. But of course, they do connect very intimately. In fact, the meaning of these two passages, taken together, is close to the core of the whole Christian message. They offer us a perfect catechesis on the meaning of real love, and the nature of human dignity.

First, let's talk about love. You'll remember that the first reading is taken from the *Acts* of the Apostles. Not the "*Interesting Thoughts* of the Apostles" or the "*Good Intentions* of the Apostles" . . . or even their compassionate feelings — *but their acts*. Words are easy. Action is hard. But it's action, not intention, which writes the human story.

An American writer once said that history — or at least all *human* history — is a record of the encounter between character and circumstance. I think that's true. Life is the crucible where we discover what we *really* believe . . . as opposed to what we *say* we believe. And the result is our story, our history. The *Acts* of the Apostles is our earliest history as a believing people. It's a record of the encounter between the *character* of men and women on fire with God, and the *circumstances* of an unbelieving world. It's a story of action. In fact, that's the only reason we have any story to tell. The Apostles *acted* on the life of Jesus Christ. They witnessed and taught His Gospel . . . and they traveled all over the Mediterranean world to do it.

The point is, Christian love is an active verb. The believer is attentive to God, receptive to God — but *never passive*. One of the great sources of confusion in the world today, and even in the Church, is the way we so easily diminish love by mistaking it for a warm set of feelings. Those feelings are wonderful when they occur . . . but they're also unreliable. They can even be misleading.

Real love is not something we consume like an entertainment or a drug. It's something we co-create with God. It involves the will. It involves choosing to do a right action — a selfless action — and then actually doing it. That's what changes human hearts. In the long run, people remember what we do, a lot more clearly than anything we say. The Apostles preached first with their lives, then with their words. People listened because they saw. In exactly the same way, if we live well and love well because of the Gospel . . . *only then* will people begin to listen to what we say about the Gospel.

The readings show us a couple of other important things about love. It is outwardly focused. We love for the sake of others. It's also radical — we don't consume it; love consumes us. Jesus was the most radical lover of all. He emptied Himself of His own life *completely*. And He tells us in the Gospel today that we can't be fruitful unless we do the same. "Love one another as I have loved you."

Love is also personal, because it is lived *not primarily in ideas or programs or structures . . .* but in the flesh-and-blood relationships of daily life, between God and creature, friend and friend. In other words, real love always has a face. It's never a theory. Endorsing the ethical message of Christianity — or even this or that particular theology — doesn't make you a Christian. The Pharisee Christians in the first reading missed the whole point of the Gospel. Their faith was from the intellect — not from the heart or the soul — and so it became a kind of weapon, a tool to divide. Jesus, on the other hand, could teach so powerfully because He loved so deeply and so well. People met the *person* of Jesus Christ, and their lives changed. That's what being a Christian means. A Christian is a *follower* of Jesus Christ. And you only follow someone you've personally met. Someone you know and trust and love.

Love also has a cost. "Greater love has no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends." Love always involves personal sacrifice. You may not be called upon to *give* your life for someone. But we're all called to *live* our lives for others. And of course dying to our pride, and to our desire to control others, can be just as intense as real, physical pain.

It's a great sign of God's presence in the first reading that the Apostles and the elders — all of them Jews — would put away their own experience and take Christ at His word: that the yoke of His love should be light. In humility, they chose to welcome and include the Gentiles into the Church without adding the burden of Jewish law. For the Apostles to do otherwise would have been the equivalent of Moses at Meribah, striking the rock twice instead of once — just for good measure — in case God didn't know what He was doing.

That's what the Pharisee Christians were saying, in effect — sure, Jesus is Lord, but we know better; we can do better . . . just to be safe. Instead, through their humility and obedience to Christ's word, the Apostles made possible an explosion of the Gospel throughout the Roman world. So the first reading captures one of the really pivotal moments in all of salvation history. The Apostles die to their own selfish prejudices toward the Gentiles, *for the sake of* the Gentiles — just as Christ died for His friends. The fruit of their love, 2,000 years later, is this church full of Gentiles praising the Anointed One of Israel as our Lord.

My second point is this. These readings teach us a lot about our dignity as human beings. We live in a time when we're caught between huge pride in our science and technology, and deep fear about our personal powerlessness. We seem dwarfed by the size of our institutions and problems. But it's a lie. We're not powerless. God created us for a purpose. In the Gospel today, Jesus says that each of us is chosen. Each of us is appointed. This is what the word "vocation" means. It comes from the Latin word, "to call." Christ calls us to the task of loving — and He promises that our love will not only bear fruit, *but fruit which abides*. In other words, lives motivated by love have meaning. They're fertile. They shape the future by filling it with new life — both in the spirit and in the laughter of children.

Of course, you graduates will very soon go out into a world that exalts sterility. I don't think it's an accident that, as we run away from new life and desperately avoid bearing children, the spirit of our music, our literature and our art dries up. We've achieved so much — and so much of it is joyless. There's a reason for that. We're not made to be barren. Joy springs from hope, and we can't simultaneously hope in the future and make war on it.

God loved us and believed in us enough to send us His only son. Jesus loved us and believed in us enough to elevate us from servants to friends — and then to lay down His life for His friends. Is there any greater sign of our worth, our immense value as children of God — than that kind of radical love?

" . . . I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should abide . . . "

Remember this day and these readings. *You* are chosen. *You* are appointed. Your witness is the seed of the future. The creed we recite today is the "abiding fruit" of the believers who came before us. A century from now, others will look back on you and me . . . and the "abiding fruit" of *our* lives, and *our* love for Jesus Christ.

When you leave here today, be true to them. Be true to those in the faith who came before us. And to those who will come after us.

*In that spirit, may God grant each of us the unselfish love to hear His voice . . . and the courage to act on it by following His call.*