

## 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Easter

### Cycle B-2024

In my bedroom, I have two pictures that are hung across from one another. One is God the Father kissing Jesus, God the Son, on the head while having His arm rest on His shoulder. It powerfully captures the intimate communion that exists between the two of them. The other picture is of Jesus embracing someone who has just entered into heavenly paradise. The love between the two is palpable, and the look on the man's face speaks of complete surrender and satisfaction in the arms of His Savior. The caption of the picture reads: "As I travel down the paths of life, I long for the journey's end. For my destination is with my Savior, resting in the arms of my Best Friend."

The reason I put them across from one another, is for me, they visually articulate the following Scripture passage from today's Gospel that is near and dear to my heart: "As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love." Every time I reflect on these two pictures, my heart is pierced, and it re-enkindles my love and devotion to God. It tangibly reminds me that a

mutual love and communion with God, is the cornerstone of my existence, the deepest desire of my heart, and the ultimate joy of my soul.

Speaking of joy, we often use the words joy and happiness interchangeably. There is an important difference between the two. Happiness is more related to a satisfying experience. A delicious meal brings our taste buds to utter ecstasy. Doing something that we enjoy allows us to experience a renewed passion and appreciation for the gift of life. The beauty of nature leads us to experience a spirit of awe and wonder.

Joy on the other hand, is more related to a satisfying relationship. Our Gospel reading reveals that we experience our ultimate joy through our soulful communion with Jesus Christ. The joy of the Lord will increasingly fill our hearts to overflowing whenever we make Jesus Christ our First Love and the center of our lives, raise our minds and hearts to Him in praise and thanksgiving, learn more about Him through reflection and study, wash His feet through our service of other people, and whenever we personally live out and share with others, the will of God.

In our country and our world, we need to be reminded that there is a God ordained, inseparable, connection between love, joy, and doing the will of God, that is revealed in today's Gospel. We truly love God when we keep His commandments. We experience true joy, the joy of the Lord, by being in communion with Him, through trust, prayer, and fidelity to His Word. From a biblical and spiritual perspective, they rise and fall together. The stark reality is that we can only love Jesus Christ, and be filled with His joy, to the degree we live our lives in union with His will.

As we spiritually and morally mature, we will increasingly encounter either this interior unity or interior discrepancy. If it is all lined up right, we will have inner joy. If they are not, our joy will not be complete because of our experience of restlessness, emptiness, confusion, guilt, and shame. What is happening is that our own consciences are convicting us about union or alienation from God. We have this settling or unsettling experience because through the Holy Spirit, the law of God has been planted and written on our hearts. We sense it, we intuit it, deep within. St. Augustine poetically and profoundly articulated his own existential experience of this spiritual drama through these words: "Our hearts were made for

you O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

We also experience true joy through our communion with other people. In being Christ for them, and allowing them to be Christ for us, both in lighthearted and substantial ways, the heart to heart, and life to life connection, provides us with a God given joy. Why? Because like the Holy Trinity who breathed us into life, we are a relational people. There is an intrinsic connection between joy and relationship.

It is our soulful communion with Jesus Christ, that makes it possible to increasingly imitate the following words of Jesus: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Laying down our life for Jesus includes, yet goes far beyond, sacrificing our mortal bodies. We can lay down our lives for Him, in a myriad of ways, on a daily basis. We can pray when we don’t to pray, love when we don’t want to love, serve when we don’t to serve, forgive when don’t want to forgive, change when we don’t want to change, and to be faithful when we don’t want to be faithful. In dying to ourselves in these ways, we are dying for the Lord, with the promise of resurrection and new life, both now and for all eternity. As we cast off our old selves, we are

simultaneously becoming a new creation in Christ, right here and right now.

The catch to all of this is that we will only lay down our lives for Jesus, to the degree that we love Him and trust in His love for us. We can all relate to that on a human level. The overwhelming majority of us would not be willing to die for anybody except maybe some of our beloved family members and friends, or our beloved country. The same is true concerning how much we are willing to express sacrificial love for them on a regular basis. Love is the fuel that propels us to more frequent and profound forms of sacrificial love.

Our willingness to exercise sacrificial love for Jesus Christ is fueled by our ongoing, soulful communion with Him. As sacrificial love for Him and others becomes a habit, it becomes part of our character. As we exercise this aspect of our character, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of love, we become capable of more consistent and radical forms of sacrificial love, even to the point of physical death. With this type of living faith, our joy becomes complete, because we no longer fear sacrifice or death. We become the most joyful and peaceful people in the world because we live into the

conviction that “nothing can separate us from the love of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord.”