

May 02, 2021
5th Sunday Easter
Acts 9:26-31
1John 3:18-24
John 15:1-8

Recently I was asked to speak, virtually of course, to the graduating seniors at the high school in Philadelphia from which I graduated 5 decades ago. They are physically in school, so I would be speaking to the senior assembly. When I accepted the invitation I didn't realize that the senior assembly was second period on Fridays. While that sounds reasonable on the surface, second period in Philadelphia is 3:30 AM here. So last week Friday I arose at 3 AM and put on my Zoom attire: Aloha shirt and ratty old gym shorts. I tried my best to appear awake and alert, coffee cup in hand.

The topic I was asked to speak about was Leadership, which is neither here nor there relative to this homily or to today's gospel. But in my closing remarks I said something like: "I hope each and every one of you gets the opportunity to be a part of something truly great in your lifetime".

In reflecting on that wish I would venture to guess that each and every one of us has been part of something truly great in our lifetimes—probably more than once.

I suspect some of us may have been part of a championship team. Maybe we were part of a special high school or college graduating class. Some of us may have had the opportunity to invest careers in a truly special organization or vocation. I suspect most of us come from loving families. All of us here today are part of a very special stewardship parish capable of accomplishing great things together—just look out the window.

I invite you to take a moment and think back upon something great of which you were a part, in which you played a role. Were you a net contributor or a net taker? Were you life-giving to the great something and to those with whom you participated? Did success come easy, or was it a struggle? In order to play your role successfully, did you need to be formed or transformed? Chiseled like a rough piece of granite? Or maybe pruned like a branch on a vine? Was the chiseling or pruning painful? Did it bear fruit for you and others? Did you achieve success only after experiencing failure, perhaps multiple failures?

Now consider today's gospel. Jesus is inviting us all to be one of His disciples—to be branches on the Divine vine. This is the greatest something we will ever have the opportunity to be a part of. The question is this: What kind of branch will we be? Will we bear fruit? Will we be life-giving to the vine? Are we willing to submit to the pruning of the vine grower in order to become even more fruitful disciples, as painful as that pruning process may be?

Some years ago I had the opportunity to tour a vineyard and observe first-hand how a vintner prunes the branches on the vine. There was cutting with a scapel and then splicing and then

more cutting with parts of the branch removed and tossed away to make room for healthy growth and regeneration. The vintner went about his craft with loving hands, but the process seemed like it was painful to the branch. It probably was. How much pain are we willing to undergo to remain on the only Vine that gives true life—life that lasts forever? Think about the pain that Divine Vine endured in order to win for us the opportunity to be branches on that Vine.

I suspect that when you reflect back upon some experience in your life where you were part of something great—something truly special—that there was a good deal of pain along the way. But you persevered because you believed in the cause—the “something”. In the end I suspect the pain you experienced was worth it.

Jesus’ invitation to be His disciple in today’s gospel will be worth whatever the cost. He tells us that Himself. “Whoever remains in Me and I in him will bear much fruit.... If you remain in Me and My words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you.”

As we continue our celebration today, I know what I want to ask for. I want to ask for the grace to persevere in discipleship; to be continually pruned so that I can remain in Him—in the Divine Vine—for all eternity. I invite you to join me in my prayer.