

5th SUNDAY OF EASTER – A (May 7, 2023)

The more we become familiar with the gospels, the more we realize just how much Jesus ‘pushed the envelope’ in what he said and did. He dared to claim the authority to forgive sins—something only God can do. He said ‘unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you’ (Jn 6:53)—and many disciples left him because this was just too strange. And today we hear: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

This really is a very bold claim that Jesus makes for himself! Notice: he did not say that he is one possible way, one potential truth, or one choice for life among many others. No—he declares himself to be the way, the truth and the life. If we would hear anyone saying that about himself, we’d probably think: “the nerve—who in the world does he think he is??” But then we remember that it’s Jesus who said this: the one who proved the truth of his claims by the divine power of his miracles and especially by his rising from the dead. He was simply stating the facts, the reality, the truth about himself.

Let’s consider for a moment Jesus’ claim to be the truth. Truth: that which conforms to reality and which accurately and correctly describes things as they really are. For example, it is true that $2 + 2 = 4$. But Jesus here is talking about much more important truth—e.g. that no one comes to the Father except through him. Elsewhere in John’s gospel he made similar claims:

- “If you live according to my teaching ... then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32).
- when he was brought before Pontius Pilate, Jesus said: “For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” (John 18:37). Pilate’s response is a classic summary of the cultural air we breathe these days: “What is truth?” (John 18:38). You can almost hear the sneering tone in his voice: “and just who do you think you are??”

Today’s version of Pilate’s response is ‘you have your truth and I have mine.’ That attitude can work if we are talking about opinions or preferences--one’s favorite color, kind of music, or breakfast cereal. But it does not work when it comes to truth. Either $2 + 2 = 4$, or it does not—it’s one or the other; both cannot be true at the same time. So if you say that $2 + 2 = 4$, and I say ‘no, it equals 17’, it would be foolish for me to say: “oh, well—you have your truth and I have mine”...instead, I’d need to go back to grade school arithmetic.

Jesus, as the truth, taught the truth about himself and the Father, and about who and what we are and how we are to live. And he established the Church to carry on his teaching—those truths--throughout the world and throughout history. Consider, for example, the truths we find in Scripture that every person is made in the image and likeness of God, that we are made as male and female, and that that difference leads to marriage as a covenant of self-giving love and is ordered to bringing new life into the world.

We know well how aggressively these truths are rejected in our time. Planned Parenthood and others in positions of power and influence reject the right to life of the unborn child. Others

declare that there is no basic truth about marriage other than what any two (or more) people say they want it to be. Still others declare that their maleness or femaleness is a matter of their own decision or ‘self-identification’ and has nothing whatsoever to do with the physical structure of their bodies.

This isn’t the time to go into the details about what the Church teaches on these subjects and why; I’ve done that already and will no doubt address these issues again as new circumstances arise. Here, we simply need to affirm some basic truths:

- the truth that life is indeed a gift from God; he has declared with great clarity “you shall not kill”, and nowhere did God ever make an exception to that commandment for the unborn child;
- the truth that marriage is an institution ordered to the covenant of love and openness to new life; and the male/female nature of genuine marriage, designed by God precisely for that purpose, is essential to the fulfillment of that purpose;
- and the truth that our bodily nature as male or female is written into every single cell of the human body, and that nature cannot be changed by any therapy or surgery.

To state and defend these truths is to invite all kinds of very strong anger, rejection, and even at times violence these days—witness, for example, the hundreds of cases of Catholic churches and pro-life centers that have been vandalized and ransacked in recent years in this country alone. We are said to be hate-filled bigots because we don’t accept all that is advocated and practiced these days. No—that is not what we are. As Catholic Christians, we firmly believe that every person—without exception—is a beloved child of God, made in the image and likeness of God, and redeemed by the precious Blood of Jesus Christ. We believe that to be true of every person, including those who reject our faith and those who hate us and who want to silence us.

But we must also stand firm in holding to these truths about ourselves—our personhood, our sexuality and all the others. The Church will not back away from these truths because she cannot back away from these truths. Jesus established the Church on the rock of St. Peter and the other apostles in order to carry on his words and his work; before he ascended into heaven, the risen Christ told the apostles: “Teach [the nations] to carry out everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20). Will we face rejection, ridicule, and hatred? Yes, we will and we do. Will we face persecution? Given the trends in our culture and politics these days, we can’t deny the possibility...at least at some level.

But we will be in very good company; in fact, in the best of company—with he who is the way, the truth, and the life...and Jesus faced that very rejection, hatred, and persecution. Today’s gospel passage is the beginning of Jesus’ Last Supper discourse to the apostles. At the very end of that discourse, he said to them: “You will suffer in the world. But take courage! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33). Jesus has indeed overcome the world through his death and resurrection, and so we really have nothing to fear. That is indeed the truth.