

5th Sunday in Easter cycle B

A stunt, as defined by Webster's dictionary, is a daring, difficult, or dangerous feat done to get attention. One of America's premier stuntmen is David Blaine, whose feats are so notoriously difficult, some might say bizarre, that many consider it elevated to an art form; hence, he is known as not merely a "stuntman" but a "stunt artist." This past week, Blaine gained more attention for his failure than he normally does for his successes. I can't underscore this enough: do not try this at home, or anywhere else for that matter; chained and handcuffed, he set out to break the world record for holding one's breath under water, that record being 8 minutes, 58 seconds; roughly the length of a homily. I can truly not imagine: can't imagine doing it, wanting to do it, or considering doing it. I don't know the name of the person who holds the record for holding his breathe—underwater, not during my homilies—but Blaine didn't really come close. Two minutes shy, out of 9 minutes; and then he was pulled from the aquarium by divers as his face contorted in pain and bubbles started to come up to the surface, and his body started going into convulsions. The body simply cannot be deprived of oxygen for that long. Cut off from its supply of oxygen, the body rebels. And it was obvious watching the video of Blaine's rescue, that his body and his will were not in accord on this one: he wanted to stay in the water, and break the record, and do his escape artist thing. But in order to set the record, he had to relax his mind to the point of going into a state of semi-consciousness; and in that state, while his mind was relaxed and his will at rest, his body pleaded for the oxygen it needed. While his body fought for air and rebelled against the stunt by convulsing, Blaine with what awareness he had struggled against his rescuers; too weak from his own stunt, however, to prevail against them, and because of that, alive to share with us, what in the world he was thinking while in that tank.

In today's Gospel reading, we heard Jesus' discourse on the vine and the branches: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me." It's a stark imagine, and one that we see in nature all the time: the branch, the leaf, broken off from the rest of the plant; losing it's color, losing moisture, drying up and eventually crumbling or burning, but having essentially lost its life, even while the rest of the tree or plant lives on. So is the soul that allows itself to be cut off from God. It's why some sin is called mortal, or deadly; because God's sanctifying grace ceases to vivify the one who cuts himself off from this vine. But as the body cut off from it's supply of oxygen will react, so does the soul cut off from God react; the unconnected branch becomes especially vulnerable to doubt, and slowly loses hope. It's seen all the time: few people stop coming to Mass because they doubt; rather, they begin to doubt after they've stopped coming to Mass. As God becomes relegated to a smaller and smaller corner of one's existence, the questions start to creep in: is religion really necessary? Does my faith really make a difference in who I am and how I live my life? Does it all matter? And as that soul, no longer being fed with God's graces starts to die spiritually, the questions become more profound: is there even a God?

Is there really a heaven, or a hell? Sometimes the doubter looks for replacements and new belief systems: turns to nature religions, turns towards self; feels drawn to man-made philosophies and religions based on man's desire for what is comforting for him to believe, rather than on God's revelation: wistful replacements, based more on feelings than historical evidence. The branch, apart from the vine, may *go* on, but does not really *live* on, spiritually. And it doesn't, because it no longer receives life from the only one who can give it.

Throughout the Easter season, we listened in the first reading to passages from the Acts of the Apostles, which as a whole stresses the importance of community by relating the stories of the earliest Christian communities back in the days following Jesus' ascension. And today's responsorial psalm is worthy of consideration as well: I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people. Part of praising God, and an important element of our faith, is being connected to our faith community. There are different levels of community within the Church: the Church universal, dioceses, but mostly parishes; the parish is the focal community or assembly to which we belong, and to which we ought to be connected. Consider what happens to one who never really gets connected to the Christian community in some way: while that one will still have faith in God, and have God's life dwelling within them, they are prone to slip into slothfulness. It's easy to not get involved and if we never help with any of the work, never take on any parish responsibilities, then we are only being served, not serving others as Christ commanded us. My first year as a Catholic, I didn't even register in a parish, even though I should have registered here at Saint Mary's at the time. I did register my second year, though, and decided to get involved: teach CCD, take on an hour of adoration, simple things, but they connected me to the parish community. Becoming connected, I became more devoted; becoming more devoted, I grew closer to God, and deeper in to my faith. There are so many things to do and ways to serve; but there is only one way avoid it all, and that's by essentially cutting oneself off from the community when one doesn't have to. Such a one may not lose his faith, but will likely put a cap on its growth.

Today is Mother's Day, and we honor in a special way all those women who have answered the call to this great vocation; we honor our mothers who are still with us, and remember in prayer those who have gone to God. It is particularly those whose mother's are no longer with us here who can appreciate what it means to be cut off, by death, from loved ones; there is an emptiness it entails, a part of one's self is sort of missing. May is also the month of Mary who epitomizes for us the role of mothers as well as the communion of saints; and as we die when cut off from God, and struggle to grow when cut off from the community of believers, so also it is not good for us to be cut off from the saints, and especially from Mary. Mary, as our great spiritual mother, nurtures our faith, and prays for us; like any good mother, she cares for us, and watches over us; her heart breaks for us, and so it should not be surprising that the apparitions of Mary which have occurred through out history can be summed up in one message: begging us, pleading with us, to

please listen to her Son and follow him. Keeping Mary and all the other saints as well on the outside of our faith restricts our faith: it will be alive, and may even grow, but the growth will be limited. We will never fully understand what the Church calls the economy of salvation, how salvation is not just a moment in time for the individual, but the culmination of God's awesome plan, played out over centuries, and coming down to pivotal moments: Mary's "yes" to God was a pivotal moment in MY salvation, and underscores the greatness of his plan. To have a devotion to Mary and the saints is to increase our awareness of the height and depth and width of God's plan for us—he involves all these other people in our salvation. Rather than take away from God, it can only make us love God more. On the other hand, to cut ourselves off from the saints is to neglect knowledge of God's plan, and to neglect communion with his holiest witnesses.

Mary and the saints are not the vine; our faith community is not the vine; Jesus Christ is the only vine and he alone gives us life. But as he says, the vine must be pruned, and will be pruned by God if we are faithful to him: it will be pruned by shedding our selfishness, our laziness, our doubt, and our ignorance; it will be pruned by submitting to God and to his Church, helping with the work, and listening to what our Lord teaches through Scripture and Tradition, including about the important roles of those around us: the saints in heaven, and our fellow pilgrims on earth, who help us to solidify our bond with him. David Blaine thought that he could force his body to go for nine minutes without oxygen; his body rebelled against his grand stunt. If ever a soul finds him or her self cut off from the Mystical Body, veering towards doubt, disbelief, laziness, or selfishness, it will also plead: reconnect us, now, to the vine. The mind may desire many things; our souls were created, however, for union with God, and we, the branches, will not be at peace, unless and until we are being fed and enlivened by the vine who alone gives us true life—Jesus Christ.

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