

6th Sunday in Easter cycle B

Sports aficionados are able to recall a number of games. The best-remembered, though, are the ones that were won or lost in the very last minutes: the last-second pass down the field, the unexpected homerun. To be honest, I've missed my share of exciting sports moments, because I am one of those who will leave the game early; and I know that I haven't been walking out of them alone. We are, by and large, a restless society, ready and anxious to get on to the next thing. We leave football and baseball and basketball games early, so that we can beat all that traffic; and as a result, we miss some pretty terrific moments in sporting events. We leave movies before the credits start rolling, and sometimes miss the amusing tag, hilarious outtakes, or jazzy score. Some even duck out of Mass ahead of the priest, and maybe miss the best hymn of the day, and many people, honestly, haven't received that final blessing in years. We leave before the end for various reasons; we remain until the end, mostly, for one reason: to gain all that there is to be gained, see all that there is to take in; to complete our experience of something, to enjoy it in its fullness.

In today's Gospel passage from John, Jesus tells his disciples "remain in my love." What does he mean by that? He doesn't say "keep being lovable or obedient or faithful so that I keep loving you"; Jesus' love is unconditional, he will love us no matter what we do or don't do. He doesn't even say to keep loving him; but he says to "remain in *my* love." Just as we can remain at some event, or leave, so too may we remain in Jesus' love, or break away from it; to remain means to keep accepting his love, keep allowing his love to reach us. For the past several weeks during the Easter season, this has been a recurring theme: when Jesus spoke of himself as being the Good Shepherd, and we the sheep, his message is *stay in his flock*, let him keep on being our shepherd; follow him. When he spoke of himself as the vine and we the branches, again his message is consistent: remain on the vine, keep being one with him, keep being nourished and fed by him. Jesus isn't ever going to toss one of the sheep out of his flock; Jesus will never be the one to sever the branch from the vine. And in today's Gospel, he describes his love as this all-encompassing state, which will engulf us and our lives; he speaks of the state of grace which enables us to leave this world being able to live in heaven with God. And he will never throw us out of this state, he will never withdraw his love for us. But he will also never take away our free wills, and that freedom which we enjoy has one scary component, and that component is the ability to choose to not remain in his love. We have the ability to commit serious sin; we do so for various misguided reasons, but no matter what the reasons, what happens is the same: we withdraw from him. Jesus keeps loving us; mortal sin sends the message: love declined.

In the passage this weekend from the Acts of the Apostles, Peter encounters Cornelius. It's the tail end of part of a bigger story, and a pretty significant one, at that: Peter had just had a vision sent by God about all foods being clean, and he understood his vision better in the context of his encounter with Cornelius; he understood that God was trying to communicate to him not only about food, but about the universality of God's love, and about the Gospel being for all people, including the Gentiles. And so he says "in truth, I see that God shows no partiality." God doesn't prefer the Israelites, or the Gentiles. Peter has one of those "light bulb" moments, when all the information his brain had been gathering sort of coalesces: aha, this is what the big picture is about, this is how all the pieces fit together. And this realization is that God's love is universal, is in no way restricted by place or time or nationality or ethnicity, and so it goes hand in hand with John's teachings about the nature of God's love. Love isn't just a feeling—Jesus doesn't command us to have warm feelings about everybody else, and then go and do whatever pleases us. He says, specifically, you will live in my love if you keep my commandments. Just as Peter had his "aha, now I understand" moment about the universality of God's love, we also will have those moments when we realize, from knowledge and not just feelings, what God's love is, and what it demands. We remain in Jesus' love not because we feel good about who we are and what we do, but because we know, objectively, that we are seeking his will and upon knowing it, fulfilling it.

Jesus told his disciples “I no longer call you slaves; I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father.” *You are my friends*; how do we become friends, with anyone, as well as with God? We become friends with others by sharing time together; we become friends by disclosing ourselves to them: little by little, piece by piece sharing more intimate details of who we are and what makes us tick. And on the receiving side of friendship, we demonstrate that we can be trusted. That’s the dynamic of our friendship with Jesus: we give him more and more of our time, be it in prayer or worship or study or service. And Jesus, in his turn, entrusts us with more. He has entrusted us with all of his sacraments, even though we may use them wrongly or improperly, irreligiously even, and most scary of all, even sacrilegiously, but he entrusts himself to us nonetheless. Think of the great trust he displays by not only becoming present on the altar in the Eucharistic, but by becoming completely vulnerable. He may be received with faith, but some people will receive him with no faith at all, just walk on up here as though to “take the bread” rather than understand that they are receiving the Body of Christ. He may be received with reverence, but some will approach him and return to their pews as if it they were picking up this week’s bulletin. He may be received with sincerity, but some will say “amen” with their lips, while with their lives say that they believe some of this, but not all of it. That’s why what we do outside of these walls is as significant as what we do while we’re here; there should be a certain dignity to the life of a Christian, because our chastity is a greater sign than mere discipline; it says we love Jesus and will give up anything he asks us to, out of love for him. Our mercy towards others says we follow Jesus and will imitate him, and will lay aside our grievances because we understand that this is what he has done in forgiving us. And our charity towards others is more than just being nice; it says that we understand how encompassing God’s love is, and that he has elected not only to love us, but to use us to show his love to others. By living the Christian lifestyle, by demonstrating that we can be trusted to treat all the sacraments and every sacred thing with awe and reverence, by sharing our time and our talents with Jesus, all that we’re doing is remaining; basking in the bath of the baptismal innocence we first received, celebrating the fact of his resurrection and the promise of the life to come. We’re just remaining in his love, rather than choosing to leave it, if even for what we think may be only for a time.

In all my years, I’ve never heard anyone say that they put down some big bucks in order to go the stadium, and then get out of there before everybody else does so that they can be the first one home; if that’s the case, just stay home and keep your money, too. I’ve never heard anyone say that they’re going to go to part of Mass, catch everything up until the last song. The reason we go to anything is to experience it; and we don’t get the full experience unless we remain until the end. Our faith can be a matter of so much outward appearance, but if it’s only appearance, it won’t be the full experience. The full experience comes from being Jesus’ friend. More knowledge, more trust, more time will always build a better friendship, and keep us more solidly where we need to be. The truest fan remains until the game is officially won, or lost. The Christian who is the true friend remains in Jesus’ love until the very end; even though he’s always free to walk away, he chooses to stay because whatever is to be gained from sin is nothing compared to what is to be experienced in heaven. There, we will live forever in Christ’s love, as long as we remain in that love here.