

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, May 10, 2020

The first followers of Christ who burgeoned into the early church were collectively known as “*The Way*.” And in today’s Gospel, Jesus makes it clear that *He* is the Way -- The way, the truth, and the life that God gives *us* as His eternal *gift* of compassion. This way is *not easy* -- not even on a *good* day! And here we are, in the midst of social distancing, trying to live our lives while not being overcome by the fear of disease and death -- Which is very *present* to us in the middle of the coronavirus assault. While we should be *prudent* and *careful* and *patient*, we should *be not afraid*. As Jesus said to His dearest loved ones at His last meal before dying: “Do not let your hearts be troubled.... have faith in me.” That’s a fitting message for anyone who decides to be a Christian -- Who decides to follow *Jesus* -- the *Way* -- A way of life that means carrying crosses and facing rejection, And trusting in the power of God’s *love* above the temptation to succumb to the *fear* of death. So how are we doing? That’s the question to delve into deeply this 5<sup>th</sup> week of Easter. *Are* we alive with the Risen Christ? Or do we give into fear? Do we treat others as *assets* to our well-being -- brothers and sisters of the same family in Christ, Or as *liabilities* -- rivals to our happiness in life? Do we *want* to look at others’ differences as something to be shunned? Or can we see as *Christ* sees -- Seeing differences as opportunities to *grow* together into the One Body of Christ. So hard to do *any* day of the year! But even *more* so in a time of physical separation from the gathering support of loved ones -- Including our fellow members of Christ’s Body in our Church. We may even be tempted to think Christ is not with us. But again, Jesus tells us today: Do not let your hearts be troubled... have faith in Me.” In other words, don’t despair! Don’t give up or give in to fear! I AM with you always! John was inspired to write these words from Jesus down for *His* community -- Those Christians nearing the end of the first century, who were *still* waiting for Jesus to return. But John reminds them that Christ will *never* abandon them. 2,000 years later, the Word of God still *lives*. Christ is speaking to *us* -- here and now: to stay faithful -- *Not* to abandon Him or His Church made of Living stones -- Living followers of the *Way* -- He *is* our rock in times of chaos and division and darkness and thirst. When we follow Him, we become *like* Him: The stone rejected by the power of evil at work in the world. The same stone that God chose as His *cornerstone* -- The foundation of His Church. We are the living stones of this church. Even should these walls be torn down, we are chosen and precious as members of Christ’s Living Body. And Christ will see us to completion as one Body. Will we *let* Him?

I was shopping just the other day at Price Chopper on Congress Street, And I was staring at the sign over the aisle to see what it contains. Well, a disheveled man with an unnatural glare of agitation in his eyes approached me. He may have thought I was staring at him and not the sign. He incoherently rambled about some offense he bore by a relative or housemate. So, I looked at him with a calming presence and simply said: “I hear you.” And then he abruptly wandered off, Besieging all the potato chips and cheese doodles on one of the endcaps. *Part* of me said: “*Thank God* -- he went *away!*” And that’s the *sinful* part -- the part that seeks *division* of Christ’s Body rather than communion. *That’s* the part of me acting out of fear that Christ is not *with* me.

If we all stop and think and pray, I’m sure *most* of us have caved into that fear on some level, even just a little bit, Just for a split second, or in a chance encounter like mine at the market. But the part of me still grafted onto the *vine* of Christ’s love thought *this*: *Maybe* I was

supposed to meet Christ *Himself* at the end of the snack aisle that day -- In that man who seemed so *foreign* -- so *dangerous* to me -- So *unlike* me. And it *is* the Christ in me that can see the Christ in that *inconvenient* man. Christ who *opens* my eyes and my heart to *nurture* and build up His Body -- Rather than drive it away or knock it down. Differences are opportunities to challenge us to gather into a complementary whole -- Something *greater* than the sum of our individual parts. Rather than seeing *irritating obstacles* or threats to our own individualities, we discover *strengths* in coming together as one. Countries encourage this when they prepare for war. Our citizens demand this of our leaders against the attack of the coronavirus. *What's* that motto we find on our dollar bills? And our nickels and dimes too! It says: *E pluribus unum*. Meaning: *Out of Many -- ONE*. And so, the Christian life *thrives*! One body made of many parts. Before leaving the dinner table to be imprisoned and executed, Jesus prayed that we be *one* just as He and the Father are *one*. That we love one another as if we love the best part of *ourselves*, temples of the Holy Spirit.

Many in history have preferred to *squash* diversity. To be agents of evil -- agents of *division* in the world. Look at the eugenic philosophy of the Nazis, Or the dehumanizing collectivism of the Stalinist and Maoists, Or the segregationists of the U.S. It's the fundamental sin of tribalism -- of looking at others as less than ourselves -- As things to be *shunned* if not eradicated. And it comes in much *subtler* form than the Third Reich! Like the little *supermarket* impulse I confessed to you. Or like classic studies of showed teachers discriminating -- Subconsciously misjudging students as problems or as mentally deficient, Simply because they're from a different culture or class. But just look to nature *itself*: The detriments of inbreeding and overly homogenous gene pools. Even our DNA cries out for diversity in order that we thrive.

So, this is our challenge: To listen not only to the cry of our DNA, But the cry of *Christ*: "Do not be afraid. Have faith in me. I am with you always. Love one another." And *remember*: you and I are *chosen* and *precious* in God's eyes; So much so that He has made us members of His one Body, the Church. A Church that can celebrate diversity *because* of its unity and strength in Christ. Beware of misjudging one another and causing division. Divisiveness is but an evil against God -- Against His fundamental nature as ONE in 3 Persons; Against His fundamental desire to *share* His nature with all of us. This week, and in the remaining weeks, years, and decades of our lives, consider how you and I can be *living* stones, building up the One Church of Christ; *Being* Christ for the stranger and the marginalized and the weak, and even the irritating! Until Christ Himself *does* come again. Be living stones of *faith*, building up *Christ's* Body. *Not* the dead stones of self-idolatry and divisiveness, tearing *down* Christ's Body by throwing rocks at each other, With cold and stony hearts. *Let* ourselves be built into a spiritual house. The living Body of Christ. With hearts strengthened by facing its fears, and warmed and refreshed in staying true to faith in our common union -- Our call to communion in Christ. Please pray for me as I do for you, and as Christ does for *each* of us: That we remain *one* in His Holy Church. And whatever mark you make in this world, may it not be a mark of division and destruction, But the mark of *Christ* -- of unity and charity -- of building one another up in His Church.