Spirituality
Scripture for Life
Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



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Our Easter readings continually draw attention to our union with the Risen Christ and its implications. This week, we contemplate John's rich metaphor of the vine and the branches, part of Jesus' "last discourse" (John 14-17).

Everyone at the table with Jesus knew plenty about grapevines. For those among us who haven't wandered the vineyard, grapes grow from branches which sprout from a principal vine (trunk). The branches provide the nourishment for the bunches of grapes. Obviously, everything about the smaller vines depends on sustenance from the trunk. Jesus' metaphor illustrates his desire to be the source of life and growth for those who remain in him. Something easily overlooked is that by saying his father is the vinedresser, Jesus is describing God as a humble worker — not the master of an estate — and he portrays the Father as working continually, caring for the vine and its fruit.

To emphasize his vine image, Jesus goes on to invite the disciples, "Abide in me as I abide in you." This describes the mutual love he and the disciples share, a love that sustains their life and creates the most intimate relationship possible among them all.

The first letter of John interprets union with Christ with the phrase, "believe in his name." Like what we saw with Peter last week, believing in the name of Jesus is not an intellectual affair or even predominantly emotional. Those who believe in the name of Jesus assume his faith as their own. They believe in and through him, sharing his relationship with God and all of creation.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

April 28, 2024

Acts 9:26-31
Psalm 22
1 John 3:18-24
John 15:1-8

All of that can remain theory, nice head knowledge hardly affecting our hands and feet. The Acts of the Apostles puts energy and flesh on this idea through the example of Barnabas.

When Saul became a believer, many disciples were suspicious. Knowing how dangerous he had been, why would they not suspect that his coming to them was a hoax? They had good reason to be afraid. But somehow, Barnabas saw something different.

Might they have shared some history? Like Saul (Paul), Barnabas was not among the apostles named in the Gospels. Later, when the title "apostle" no longer symbolized a new Israel, it designated someone who had been given the mission and grace to proclaim the Gospel in deed and word. This broader understanding of apostleship included a variety of people, including at least one woman, Junia (Romans 16:7).

Luke had praised Barnabas as a member of the ideal community described in Acts 4:32-37. He explained that, although his birth name was Joseph, the community called him Barnabas, the "son of encouragement." Skipping the kind of details we might hope for, Luke says that Barnabas, true to his name, "took charge of" Saul, vouching for him and later accompanying him on mission journeys.

Might Barnabas have introduced Paul to his sense of Christ living in him and the limitless breadth of the Body of Christ? For Barnabas, life in Christ seemed to mean that his interior motivation sprang from his union with Christ. He needed no command; he was motivated by a natural and grace-filled impulse.

Recently, Yoli, one of my Peruvian sisters talked about the neighborhood women who continue to organize the *ollas comunes*, outdoor makeshift kitchens where women prepare donated food for themselves and others who need it. I asked her if the women understood this as an expression of their faith. She said, "I don't think they think of it as faith, it's simply their response to a situation of shared need."

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The women who cook for the neighborhood have imbibed their communal culture. They don't need a rule or theory to tell them they should take care of their neighbors, they simply do it. As one woman said to me, "When you know what it is to be hungry, you don't want that for anyone." I saw the same thing last year in people addicted to drugs who dwelt around a park in Philadelphia. As we shared water and sandwiches with them, people who were alert enough made sure to ask for something for others who were uncommunicative inside their improvised tents.

They felt their need.

The Sundays of Easter celebrate the resurrection and the union with God that Christ always offers — with or without our knowing it. Whether from faith in Christ or a natural impulse to love, people like Barnabas, the women, and the addicts I met are fruitful parts of Jesus' vine. They instinctively appreciate the fact that they share life with others, and like our servant God, they want all to thrive as best they can. To do that naturally is a response to grace that we all need to develop to a greater degree.

Let's ask Barnabas to encourage us.

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