

A Sermon Preached by
 Fr. Edwin Smith for Easter5, year B
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When I am preparing a sermon, the question of what I might use as a visual prop does not usually present itself until I am well on the way to completing my notes. Not so this morning. As I studied the three lessons, it became obvious to me, as I hope it will be to you, that each had very preachable subjects. I was torn between them.

Ultimately, I decided to put them together. The prop became obvious. Do you know what this is?

Yes. It is a can of 3-in-1 oil. Many of you have a can just like this in your workshop or garage. It is the household oil which can be used as a lubricant, as a cleaner, and to prevent rust (according to the label). Sort of an all-purpose oil.

I would like to suggest that our three lessons present an all-purpose formula for Christian living.

They present guidelines for relationship with each other, relationship to our Lord, and the appropriate attitude we should have to our work as disciples.

Let's look at each of them – not necessarily in the order in which they are presented in our lessons. If you will turn to the epistle lesson in your bulletin, or the pew bible.

John begins by saying, “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God.” In a real sense, those two ideas should be reversed. In other words, because love comes from God, we should love one another. His love first, our love for each other second, flowing from the first. He says as much in verse 19, where he writes, “we love because he first loved us.”

In a very practical sense, our life together as the body of Christ depends upon our love for one another. That does not mean that we always agree with one another; that we all like the same kind of music; that we all share the same devotion to a particular expression of our faith. We are evangelicals, Anglo Catholics, and charismatics, and some all three.

We are as different from one another as snowflakes differ from each other. Yet, because God loves us, we are empowered to love one another. We can either be channels to each other of the love God shows us, or we can choose to wrap that love around us as a warm blanket and forget about sharing it with others. The choice is ours.

What John is saying to us in this epistle is to choose the former – to love as God loves us. That is not always easy. However, it is possible. It is possible because the love God has for us is bountiful, never ending; uncritical, if you will. We love, essentially, in the power of God's love, because we have so much of it to give to others. That is to be the essence of our relationship with others.

In the gospel lesson, the relationship we are to have with God is made abundantly clear. Jesus says, I am the true vine, and my father is the gardener.” And later, “I am the vine, you are the branches.”

As a matter of background, we need to consider how the image of the vine is presented in scripture. Almost without exception, the image of the vine in the Old Testament refers to Israel. And, it almost always ends in the failure of that vine.

So, here we have Jesus saying, “I am the true vine.” He is the new source of nourishment to the branches. Not the nation of Israel.

This is revolutionary to the Jews. Their life is dependent upon him, not the nation. Likewise, our lives are dependent upon him. Not upon ourselves - our efforts - but Jesus.

If you've ever had the opportunity to observe a grape vine up close, you know that some branches wither and die. They do so because something, a worm, or some animal, perhaps, has caused the branch to be separated from the vine. When that happens, the vine-dresser carefully prunes the dead branch from the vine, lest it unnecessarily sap strength from the vine.

Jesus repeatedly uses the phrase, "remain in me."

We are to remain in Christ. Again, our strength and our ability to bear fruit are solely dependent upon remaining in Christ. Some translations say "abide in me," instead of "remain in me." What it means is simply keeping in contact with Jesus, seeking nourishment from him, following in his steps.

When we fail to do that, when we rely upon our own efforts, our ability to bear fruit disappears -- slowly, like the branch which dies by the inch.

So, our relationship with Jesus is to be one of a healthy branch with a nourishing vine. We remain in touch by regular worship, by continuous study of scripture, and by seeking his will, not ours, in all things.

The last element of our Christian life is found in our first lesson from the Acts of the Apostles. I confess this is one of my favorite passages in all of Holy Scripture.

Here we have Phillip. He has been preaching in Samaria, according to verse 5 of chapter 8. He had gone there to escape the persecution which had begun against the believers. Verses 6 thru 8 describe his mission in these terms, "the crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Phillip, hearing and seeing the signs he did, for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks came out of many who were possessed; and many others who were paralyzed or lame were cured. So there was great joy in the city."

Now that is a picture of a very successful ministry, is it not? I can imagine how I would have felt had I been Phillip. What a blast! Going from fleeing persecution to preaching to welcoming crowds; driving out demons; healing the infirm. Time to rest on your success.

But, the next we hear is that an angel of the Lord came to Phillip telling him to leave -- to go south on the dessert road between Jerusalem and Gaza. So he went. And on the road he encountered the eunuch, who was reading scripture. You know the rest from the lesson.

What I find most moving is that Phillip did not rest upon his apparent successes in Samaria. He did not question the angel. He obeyed and left the adoring crowd.

When the spirit told him to go up to the chariot, he obeyed. Again, no question. No second guessing. Just obedience.

My friends, that is the appropriate attitude for us, as well. God cannot readily use us without our obedience. If we are in love and charity with our neighbors, if we abide in Jesus, if we obey the leadings of the Holy Spirit, we can do great things -- we can bear much fruit for the kingdom of God.

May God grant us this day the grace to do just that and may we respond with the willingness of Phillip.