5th Sunday of Easter, Year C

The time is about A.D. 36-39. Paul has been struck down on the road to Damascus and blinded, led into Damascus and for three days was without sight, food and drink. Healed by Ananias and baptized (the only baptism of any apostle in Holy Scripture), then he preaches about Jesus in the synagogues in the area for many days (three years according to Galatians 1:17-18) until the Jews plotted to kill him causing him to flee to Jerusalem.

Acts 9:26-31

26. When Saul arrived in Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. Saul (later to be renamed Paul) was a fierce persecutor of the young Christian church. He was involved in the murder of Stephen and had gone house-to-house arresting Christians and throwing them into prison. It is not difficult to understand why the disciples would be wary of him. After all, he could be faking a change of heart in order to do them even more harm.

27. Then Barnabas This Christian descended from the tribe of Levi was born on the Island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean Sea. He was first mentioned in Acts for selling his property and giving the money for the disposal of the apostles. Although not a disciple of Christ during the Lord's earthly ministry, like Paul, he was considered an apostle and he undertook missionary trips with Paul and later with John Mark, who was his cousin. He was called "Son of Consolation." took charge of him and brought him to the apostles, It took one of their trusted own, Barnabas, to convince them that Saul has, indeed, seen the true light of faith. and he reported to them how he had seen the Lord, The conversion of Paul occurred as a result of his experience on the road to Damascus. Jesus appeared to him and Paul was ill and blinded for several days until he was cured and baptized by Ananias. After that it appears that he went to Arabia where he prepared himself in prayer and contemplation for his coming mission. and that he had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.

28. He moved about freely with them in Jerusalem, and spoke out boldly in the name of the Lord. Paul, who had not known Jesus before the resurrection, is in Jerusalem learning the traditions of the original church. This connection between Paul and the Jerusalem church is very important for the unity of the church as it spread and grew. In Galatians it says that he went to have his teaching on the Gospel approved by Peter and the other "pillars" of the faith like John. (Gal. 2:9)

29. He also spoke and debated with the Hellenists, but they tried to kill him. These were the same Greek-speaking Jews who had argued with Stephen before they stirred up the people against him and took him before the council, which led to his being stoned to death.

30. And when the brothers The idea of the new community as a brotherhood and the mutual address of "brother" are frequent in the New Testament. Christians are called "brother" about 160 times in the New Testament. learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him on his way to Tarsus. This was Paul's hometown. St. John Chrysostom explains that, in addition to grace, human resourcefulness has a part to play in apostolic activity. The disciples were afraid that the Jews would do to Saul what they had done to St. Stephen. This may be why they sent him to preach the Gospel in his homeland, where he would be safer.

31. The church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria was at peace. Though we have just heard of efforts to kill Saul, everywhere, we're told, "the church was at peace." Luke is

writing of an internal peace, the kind that prevails despite external circumstances. It was a peace of the heart, the place where "fear of the Lord" is born and where the "consolation" of the Spirit is experienced. It was being built up This refers to the continuing process of identity formation and stabilization. and walked in the fear of the Lord, This designates a way of living. and with the consolation of the Holy Spirit The presence of the Spirit manifests itself externally in such phenomena as the gift of tongues and prophecy. The Spirit also teaches the disciples what to say, it is power from above, it reveals the mysteries of God and thus inspires prophecy. It is a spirit of wisdom, of faith, of encouragement and of joy. The Spirit moves the apostles to preach and witness Jesus and empowers them to feats of courage and eloquence, which are entirely beyond the personal capacities of these Christians. In addition, there are perfections that the Holy Spirit forms in the Christian which are the first fruits of eternal glory. The tradition of the Church lists twelve of them: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, and chastity. it grew in numbers.

1 John 3:18-24

The readings chosen for the 50 days of Easter are meant to instruct the newly baptized and remind all the rest of us about the Christian way of life. Today's selection exhorts us to live in the love of Christ and not just to talk the talk but to walk to walk.

18. Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth. Once we become children of God, we must learn to act like it! Our creed calls us to a particular way of living. We learn this from (1) the things Jesus taught and (2) by his example….A CONCRETE ACT OF CHARITY IN A MINOR MATTER MAY BE A MORE VALID PROOF OF THIS LOVE THAN A LOFTY IDEA NEVER ACTED UPON. The true test of love is action.
19. Now this is how we shall know that we belong to the truth and reassure our hearts As used here, the "heart" is roughly the equivalent of our "conscience." before him
20. in whatever our hearts condemn, for God is greater than our hearts and knows everything. God knows our sins and our frailties, our most craven doubts and painful remorse, our most bitter resentments and paralyzing scruples as well as our repentance and our good desires. He fully understands and forgives us. If our conscience tells us we have done wrong, we can seek forgiveness and strengthen our hope in God. Pope John Paul II reminds us: "When we realize that God's love for us does not cease in the face of our sin or recoil before our offences, but becomes even more attentive and generous; when we realize that this love went so far as to cause the Passion and Death of the Word made flesh who consented to redeem us at the price of his own blood, then we exclaim in gratitude: 'Yes, the Lord is rich in mercy.'" This confidence in God makes for confidence in prayer.
21. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence in God If we are not conscious of having sinned, we can be even more confident of God's favor!
22. and receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do We are called to a way of living and not just a way of thinking! what pleases him. St. John insists that faith will necessarily express itself in obedience to the commandments of God and still more in love of God and neighbor.
23. And his commandment is this: we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us. As St Bede put it, "We cannot rightly love one another unless we believe in Christ; nor can we truly believe in the name of Jesus

Christ without brotherly love." Our Lord himself told us what would mark his disciples: THEIR LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER. Only by acts of sacrificial love will we truly love. Love is the signal flag of God's abiding with us.
24. Those who keep his commandments remain in him, Keeping the commandments confirms to the Christian that he is abiding in God. Moreover, it ensures that God abides in his soul. The Navarre Bible goes on to explain: "May God be your house and you God's; dwell in God that God may dwell in you. God dwells in you to support you; you dwell in God in order not to fall." and he in them, and the way we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit he gave us. A further guarantee of the divine presence is the possession of the Holy Spirit, here mentioned explicitly for the first time in the writings of John.

John 15:1-8

The metaphor of the vine underscores Jesus' union with the disciples and their absolute dependency on him for life and growth. It assumes that because the vinedresser (the Father) seeks an abundant harvest, he trims back the vine stock (Jesus) to rid it of fruitless branches (those who have defected from the Faith) and to invigorate the other branches (disciples) to become even more fruitful.

1. "I am This "I am" statement is another reference to the name which God revealed to Moses from the burning bush on Mt. Sinai in Ex. 3:14. the true Vine, When Jesus clothes himself with this imagery, he is stressing that Israel finds its life and vigor no longer in the Old Covenant but in the New Covenant ratified by its Messiah. and my Father is the vine grower. Several times the OT depicts Israel as a vineyard planted and tended by the Lord. The gates of the temple were forged in Greece, floated across the sea, brought to Jerusalem and placed in Herod's temple. 82 feet high and 30 feet wide, they were made of bronze and wrought into them was a golden vine with clusters of grapes as tall as a man's height. It symbolized the nation Israel. The carving of a bunch of grapes often adorned the front of Jewish synagogues.
2. He takes away every branch (disciple) in me that does not bear fruit, and every one that does he prunes Our Lord is describing two situations: that of those who, although they are still joined to the vine externally, yield no fruit; (They are to be cut off at the trunk.) and that of those who do yield fruit but could yield still more. (They are cut back to promote growth.) The Father must trim away our selfishness to increase our growth in love. Pruning probably refers to the trials and fatherly discipline we experience in this life. Hebrews 12 tells us how we should receive this discipline: "Endure your trials as the discipline of God, who deals with you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you do not know the discipline of sons, you are not sons but bastards. If we respected our earthly fathers who corrected us, should we not all the more submit to the Father of spirits, and live? They disciplined us as seemed right to them, to prepare us for the short span of mortal life; but God does so for our true profit, that we may share his holiness. At the time it is administered, all discipline seems a cause for grief and not for joy, but later it brings forth the fruit of peace and justice to those who are trained in its school."
   so that it bears more fruit. St. Teresa of Avilla in her book "Interior Castle" commented that "What the Lord desires is works! True love expresses itself in

action. Any one who closes his heart when he sees another's need does not truly love."

3. You are already pruned (just as at the washing of the feet when Jesus said that they were already clean—except for Judas)
   because of the word This refers to the whole of revelation, the message of eternal life.
   that I spoke to you.
4. Remain in me, as I remain in you. 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. The delivery of this sermon during the Last Supper gives it a sacramental coloring. Matthew, Mark and Luke all speak of the "fruit of the vine: as a reference to the Eucharistic Meal: "I solemnly assure you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it new in the reign of God." In the Encyclical on the Eucharist that was released on Holy Thursday in 2003, Pope John Paul II tells us that "Incorporation into Christ, which is brought about by Baptism, is constantly renewed and consolidated by sharing in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, especially by that full sharing which takes place in sacramental communion. We can say not only that each of us receives Christ, but also that Christ receives each of us. He enters into friendship with us (John 15;14). Eucharistic communion brings about in a sublime way the mutual 'abiding' of Christ and each of his followers: 'Abide in me, and I in you.'"
5. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, Union with Christ is not only the condition of bearing fruit, it also demands it. The life of union with Christ has to be focused on the good of others and if this happens, a fruitful apostolate is the result. The Catechism comments that "the Holy Spirit is like the sap of the Father's vine which bears fruit on its branches." Without this life-giving sap, which flows into the branches through the vine, we can do absolutely nothing to please the Father or move closer to salvation.
   because without me you can do nothing. This isn't a threat, it is a fact. It applies in a special way to prayer. Just as a body will grow lifeless and cold if its blood is drained away so will the Christian soul grow lifeless and cold without prayer.
6. Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither; People will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned. Damnation awaits every branch that withers away from Christ and becomes worthless. This tells us that coming to the faith is not enough. We must persevere in it! … While fire is used to describe hell, the chief punishment is eternal separation from God. Ezekiel described the residents of Jerusalem as vine branches that failed to yield fruit and so became fuel for the fires of divine judgment. Vines, the prophet reasoned, are useless to the craftsman as wood and thus have no value apart from the grapes they bear.
7. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. This implies a harmony of will with God and obedience to his commandments, which are the necessary conditions for effective prayer.
8. By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples." The Father is glorified in the works of the Son's disciples.

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from: (1) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 2003" by Aelred R. Rosser, (2) The Commentary and Notes of Tim Gray, (3) "The Founding of Christendom" by Warren H. Carroll, (4) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 1997" by Lawrence E. Mick, (5) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Acts of the Apostles" With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (6) "The Navarre Bible: Acts Of The Apostles," (7) "Dictionary of the Bible" by John L. McKenzie, S.J., (8) "Workbook For Lectors and Gospel Readers: 1991" by Graziano Marcheschi with Nancy Seitz Marcheschi, (9) "The Acts of the Apostles" by Luke Timothy Johnson, (10) "Catechism Of The Catholic Church," (11) "The Navarre Bible: Catholic Epistles," (12) "The Jerome Biblical Commentary," (13) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of John" With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (14) "The Gospel of St. John" by Stephen Ray, (15) "The Navarre Bible: St. John," and (16) The St. Paul Center For Biblical Theology Online Founded By Dr. Scott Hahn.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.