**Weekend of Sunday, May 14, 2023**

**6th Sunday of Easter/Lectionary X/Year A**

**First Reading: Acts 17:22-31**

**Second Reading: 1 Peter 3:13-22**

**Gospel Reading: John 14:15-21**

**Sermon Title: *“A Heart for Jesus”***

**Theme**

The author of 1 Peter encourages Christians to remain faithful even in the face of defamation and persecution. In baptism we are made clean to act in accordance with what is right.

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Acts 17:22-31**

22Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 23For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, 25nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. 26From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, 27so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. 28For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said,   
 ‘For we too are his offspring.’  
29Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. 30While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

**Second Reading: 1 Peter 3:13-22**

13Who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? 14But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, 15but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; 16yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. 17For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil. 18For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, 19in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, 20who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. 21And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

**Gospel: John 14:15-21**

[Jesus said to the disciples:] 15“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 17This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.  
 18“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. 19In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. 20On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. 21They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

**Sermon**

We will be celebrating the Day of Pentecost in two weeks on May 28, so though we are celebrating the Sixth Sunday of Easter this weekend, like last weekend, we still find Jesus on the infamous night of his betrayal gathered with his disciples in the upper room. So our first task is to put ourselves in that room, listening to Jesus as if we don't know the rest of the story.

So putting ourselves in that room, Jesus says, 15“If you love me, you will keep my commandments." We intuitively know this to be true in our lives. If we love someone, we want to honor that relationship by doing all we can for that person, including honoring any commands or commitments we have with them.

It's Mother's Day and since it is not practical for me to be with my Mother, I sent her Shari's Berries. However, when I go to visit her, I do whatever she wants me to do. Several years ago, after my Father died, and later when she had some serious surgeries, I spend a lot of time with her. I used to tell Carol and others, "I don't say "no" to my Mother." And while she isn't uttering *commandments* per se, I love my Mother and will do whatever she says, practically speaking.

By the way, although she is not my mother, I am taking Carol to dinner after church on Sunday. And the same things I said about my relationship with my Mother are true with Carol, only exponentially more true. She is my wife and life partner and the mother of my children and for those reasons and many more, I will honor our devotion to each other by doing whatever she says, practically speaking. I am sure you feel the same way about your primary relationships.

Now, we might ask, "What are the commandments of Jesus?" That is a very good question. Jesus actually gave some commandments and some instructions that are not a part of the Ten Commandments or the 613 commands extracted from the Old Testament. But let's remember that this week's Gospel Reading follows last week's Gospel Reading directly, and in last week's Gospel Reading (John 14:1-14), Jesus drove home the fact that he and the Father are One, so *all of the commandments* apply to a life of discipleship. Whether all those commandments are of God or still demanded by God is another question. The point is, if we love Jesus, then what he asks us to do, we must do.

15“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.

Now I want you to note that there is a period after that first verse. I also want you to be aware that punctuation as we know it, was not used in the Old or New Testament, so it is difficult to know whether the period was intended by Jesus or by later editors. But if there was no period everything changes to a conditional statement:

15“If you love me, you will keep my commandments 16and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.

Reading it that way, as a conditional statement, makes it sound like ***if*** we love him and keep his commandments, then, only ***then*** will Jesus ask his Father to send us another Advocate. This has been debated for hundreds of years, and the prevailing position is that the period stays because to remove it would be contrary to Jesus as the obedient Son to mitigate the love, grace, and mercy of God. So let's move on.

This Advocate we know of as the Holy Spirit, who will be with his disciples always and forever and should be a source of great comfort and strength for us as believers. It means that we are never alone and that we have access, a direct line to the power and guidance of the divine God-head, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in our daily lives. As we strive to live according to Christ's teachings, we can trust that the Holy Spirit will be with us, guiding us to live godly lives, and helping us to overcome our struggles and challenges.

In our First Reading, the apostle Paul speaks to the people of Athens and tells them about the true God whom he cleverly identified as the Athenian's "unknown god." He points out that the God who created heaven and earth cannot be contained in temples made by human hands, and frankly *needs nothing* from us.

This message reminds us that God is not confined to any one place or religion. God is the creator of all things and *desires* a relationship with each and every one of us. God, in God's infinite love, created us with free will, the ability to choose to love God back and so what God wants, indeed what God is jealous of, from us is our love and devotion, and Jesus just told us how to do that. Keep his, being Jesus's and his Father's commands.

But there is more to it than simply commandment keeping. If it were so, the Jews generally are better off than we are, because commandment keeping has always been *at the heart* of the living out of their faith. The godly life following Christ is not just a matter of outward actions or religious observances. It is a matter of the heart, and to get to the heart of the matter, let us turn to our Second Reading from First Peter, where Peter encourages us to stand firm in our faith, even in the face of persecution. He says,

14But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, 15but ***in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord***. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; 16yet do it with gentleness and reverence.

This sounds like 'speaking the name of Jesus into our lives,' doesn't it?

These words are a powerful reminder that our faith is not something to be kept hidden away, but rather it is meant to be shared with the world. Even when we face challenges and opposition, we can trust in God's love and power to sustain us. And what better opportunity do we have to speak the name of Jesus to others?

Living according to Christ's commandments means:

* having a heart that is filled with love, humility, and compassion.
* It means treating others with kindness and respect, even when they don't deserve it.
* It means being willing to forgive those who have wronged us, just as Christ has forgiven us.
* It means standing up for justice and righteousness, even when it is unpopular or inconvenient.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

But most of all, living according to Christ's commandments means having a heart for Jesus, a heart that is devoted to him above all else. It means recognizing that he is the one true God and that all of our hopes and dreams should be centered around and rooted in him.

When we earnestly try to live in this way, having a heart for Jesus, we can trust that the Holy Spirit will be with us, guiding us and strengthening us every step of the way.

So, my dear brothers and sisters, in our Gospel Reading we find Jesus on the infamous night of his betrayal gathered with his disciples in the upper room. And while I asked us to listen to Jesus as if we don't know the rest of the story, the truth is we know. We know from the safety of that upper room, he went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray to his Father to take this cup of suffering from him. That is where Juda betrayed him. Hours later, Peter denied knowing him, and all the rest fled into the darkness.

The next day he was sentenced to death in a mockery of justice and was nailed to the cross till dead. All this he did to save us from the sentence we deserve. It was the nails that held him to the cross, it was his heart. And for that reason, I ask you to have a heart for him.

Let us seek the true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who is known to us in the person of Jesus Christ our Lord. Let us stand firm in our faith no matter what comes our way, trusting in the promise of the Holy Spirit. May we always be ready to speak the name of Jesus into all of our life's situations, and may God bless us all as we strive to live according to his will.

**Prayer**

Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, forgive us for thinking so much of ourselves and so little of you. You are the creator, redeemer, and sanctifier that we need. In your great mercy, give to us the Spirit of your truth and peace, that we might more effectively live godly lives, obeying your commandments, and trying with all our strength to have hearts for Jesus. It is in his name we pray. Amen