Ascension of the Lord (7th Sunday of Easter) – Cycle A – May 28, 2017

“The Mission of Christ: Easy as Riding a Bike!”

Acts 1:1-11
Psalm 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9
Ephesians 1:17-23
Matthew 28:16-20

How many remember learning to ride a bike? A parent, probably, running alongside the bike, holding on to the seat for support, shouting words of encouragement, doing anything possible to take the focus OFF of falling and instead putting the focus on riding. “Keep pedaling; look straight ahead; don’t look down.” Then, somewhere along the way the hand on the seat was removed, as promised yet unexpectedly, and we were left pedaling and riding all on our own whether we realized it at the time or not. We may not remember the specifics around how WE learned to ride a bike but we will never forget HOW to ride a bike will we? The knowledge of HOW to ride a bike seems to be ingrained in from that moment in such a way that we can just do it without thinking about it.

This is similar to what the 11 disciples experience in the Ascension. “They worshiped but they doubted,” our Gospel tells us. They doubted, just like any child who takes that leap of faith of learning to ride a bike. Then, all of the sudden, as promised yet unexpectedly, the hand came off of the back of the seat, as it were, as Jesus ascended to the Father before their very eyes and they were left to continue His mission here on earth. They were to go out to all nations, “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you,” without Him there to physically hold them, support them, give them words of encouragement and telling them, in a sense, “keep pedaling and look straight ahead.” Unlike riding a bike however, the disciples and we were not left alone. The Holy Spirit was given to them to reside in them, ingrained in them as an Advocate in order to do the work Christ gave them to do, in such a way that they could do it almost without thinking about it.
This knowledge, experience and Charism that Christ left with His disciples were not meant to end with them. The mission, like one generation teaching the next to ride a bike, was meant to be handed on, shared and made available to all mankind. Like a child whose world is expanded greatly by his or her ability to move beyond where they simply can walk, this gift was meant to offer those who received it, an opportunity to life beyond this world in the eternal life of heaven with Christ once again. The means to this expanded life is Baptism which Jesus explicitly calls them to do in this moment before ascending to the Father.

This event that we hear in the Gospel today is known as the Great Commissioning as Jesus commissions His disciples to go and continue the work he started here on earth. This is also the Gospel that I use at almost all of the Baptisms I’ve ever done. I choose it because, quite frankly, it’s one of the shortest options and when you have several crying babies waiting to be doused with water, shorter is better. More importantly however, I use this passage because it is explicit, very dense with meaning, and meant for each of us here who is baptized. This Great Commissioning is “Great” because of the importance and scope of what it is calling US, all those baptized, to do: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Each of us is called to be a part of this mission and is “commissioned” through our baptism! Therefore, baptisms are a great time to remind those present: parents, Godparents, family members and friends that we are all called to actively help those being baptized learn the faith, how to practice the faith and why it is important. Just as it is important to teach our children to read or write or ride a bike, our faith and life in Christ is no different and maybe even more important.

But like the disciples who stood there in awe and fear and doubt about how they were going to accomplish this “mission”, we might feel the same way about handing on our faith to our children or anyone else for that matter. Jesus addresses this concern in the very next and last line when he says, “And behold, I am with you always until the end of the age.” In other words, he may have physically ascended to the Father but he has not left us nor left us alone. He gave us and them the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which we will celebrate next week, and who is with us always. But Christ is also present with us in each of the sacraments that we receive,
especially the Eucharist. In all of the sacraments, Jesus is present, really and truly. Likewise, Jesus is present in
the Word of God: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God,” as we
hear at the very beginning of John’s Gospel. Equally important is that Christ is present in the community that
gathers to pray, learn and worship together: “wherever two or more of you are gathered in my name, I am
there.” This why attending Mass and other communal gatherings, receiving the sacraments often and reading
scripture whenever we can is so important: so that we can be in the Real Presence of the one who never really
left us and promised to be with us “always, until the end of the age.”

Though obviously, none of us here experienced the actual Ascension, each of us here is has in some way
experienced the fear, awe, doubt and exhilaration that came over the disciples in this moment of separation, just
like the moment we realized that there was no longer a hand holding us as we learned to ride a bike. But like
riding a bike, this experience shows us that we can do it and was given to us that we might experience a world
beyond our previous limitations and is, in a sense, a gift. In Baptism and Confirmation, we receive the Holy
Spirit and all ITS gifts: wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, fortitude, piety, wonder & awe. These
gifts are given to us so that we have everything we need to continue with the mission he has given each of us to
accomplish, not in His absence but rather in His everlasting presence. Like the inherent knowledge of how to
ride a bike, these gifts often work without us being aware of them, in order to help us along our way. The more
we use these gifts and do the work of Christ in our world, the better we become at it. So much so that fulfilling
the seemingly daunting and impossible task of the “Great Commission” that Christ gave us becomes as easy as
riding a bike!

3