

If you haven't read or heard today's Mass readings for this Fifth Sunday of Easter, please read them first, particularly the Acts of the Apostles and the Gospel from St. John, and then return below for my thoughts.

I love the Acts of the Apostles, where St. Luke, the author, describes the beginnings of the Church from the great unleashing of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost until St. Paul's confinement in Rome, awaiting death.

To some, today's reading from Acts may just seem like a list of ancient towns, not exactly places to use your frequent flyer miles to visit. Lystra, Iconium, Antioch, Pisidia, Pamphylia, Perga, Attalia and another Antioch. Like, where are these places that Paul and Barnabas visited?

Let me say that, with one exception, they're all in Turkey, called *Asia Minor* in times of old. St. Paul spent two years circling in and out of these small towns on the first of his three missionary journeys. The last one listed, the second Antioch mentioned, is in Syria. *That* Antioch was the third largest city in the world, a major center of the young Catholic Church.

Paul and Barnabas made huge efforts to bring the teaching of Christ to these places and met with success in many of them. The reading says they "made a considerable number of disciples."

Paul also says that he and Barnabas, "strengthened the spirit of the disciples there and exhorted them to persevere in the faith," meaning there was lots of suffering they and others endured for Christ. He expanded, "It's necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."

Wasn't that the story of his life?

There's mention of this town called Lystra. It's the second time it's mentioned in Acts. Paul was there earlier. It's where he was stoned and nearly killed. He went right back. To preach there again...after being stoned. Incredible.

So, far more than just a list of little-known towns this short reading captures the incredible heroism of Paul and Barnabas. And what was key was the importance of their message: the need to love as they had been loved by Jesus.

That's the heart of the matter. That's what propelled them.

Why did they go there? Why put up with all the troubles? They took the words of Jesus in today's Gospel to heart. Jesus said, "Love one another as I have loved you." Now, they would bring that experience of Jesus' love for them to others.

The great reason so many came into the faith is that they could see that Paul and Barnabas were really following Jesus' way of love. Even in the hardest times they were returning good for the evil being done to them.

Christians are capable of this astonishing kind of love because they first met it in Christ.

Many years ago, an American journalist was watching Mother Teresa of Calcutta care for a dying man with gangrene. Closing his open wounds, and treating him, was a delicate and messy task. The journalist said to her, "I wouldn't do that for a million dollars." Mother Teresa said, "Neither would I. But I do it *for the love of God*."

Her kind of sacrificial love, and the love of so many others like her, springs from Jesus' teaching, "Love one another as I have loved you."

What brings purpose to our lives is that same sacrificial love.

Today, fifteen of our parish youths will be confirmed at St. Paul's Cathedral. In a recent class I told them a story which happened when I was their age, in the mid-60s, when the war in Vietnam was escalating.

The story was that of a U.S. Army soldier, Private Milton Olive, from Mississippi, trapped in a foxhole with several others. An enemy soldier threw a live hand grenade into the foxhole. Certain death awaited all those men in a second or two. Private Olive, 18 years old, hurled his body onto the grenade, completely covering it, dying instantly of course, but saving the lives of every other man in the foxhole. I remember asking myself, "Honestly, could I do that?" I still visualize that scene and ask myself that question.

A thousand examples of loving one another can be offered.

Today's Gospel returns to the Last Supper. Judas, the apostle, has left the room, having made his decision to deliver Jesus to his enemies. And Jesus speaks to the remaining eleven.

Since the disciples cannot yet follow Jesus to the cross, they receive the command to love one another - that, if obeyed - will keep His spirit alive among them as they continue their life in the world.

He tells them, and us, to love one another, but speaks in a particular way to his little community.

This teaching doesn't replace what he says in other places, about loving *all* people, but there's something special here about the love within the small band.

He says: I will remain present to you as you love one another in the family. "As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This love is how all will know that you are my disciples."

The love that Jesus teaches here is a love among Christians. It doesn't negate loving those who are not Christian. But it makes this point: If love for our fellow Christians remains in the world, the world will always be able to see and meet Jesus, something we should never forget.

And that love is a practical, down-to-earth kind of love. It's a compassionate kind of love, a self-forgetting kind of love.

There are unlimited examples.

Through our acts of sacrifice let's continue to strengthen this family right here. And through those acts know that Jesus is truly here with us and will be always. Doing that, like Paul and Barnabas, we will be magnets for Christ.