

Homily for May 17, 2015: Ascension Sunday
(Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:17-23; Mark 16:15-20)

I received a copy from the Archdiocese of Cincinnati of the report that came out Tuesday from the Pew Research Center. The Center tracked religious affiliation between 2007 & 2014. According to the study, the number of people who are professed Christians is declining sharply.

An overwhelming majority, about 70% of Americans, still call themselves Christian. But that number has dropped eight percentage points in seven years. And the number of people who are not connected with any religion in particular, the “unaffiliated,” is at an all-time high of nearly 23%—that’s three percent more than the number who call themselves Catholic.

In fact, for the first time ever, more people are “unaffiliated” than Catholic. That’s a sobering reality.

What should we make of this data? Who is to blame? I am not sure of the answer to these questions. All I can do is ask myself if the way I live my faith in Christ is exemplary or not. If I live my faith, then maybe, because of me, Jesus will be attractive to other persons.

In light of today’s scripture, it offers us another sobering reality:

We have work to do. A lot of work.

The gospel today couldn’t be more clear. Jesus tells his disciples: “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature.” In the reading from Acts, he assures them, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

But if you look at that Pew study and read the statistics, you have to wonder: Are we even trying? Or are we, like the disciples, staring up at the heavens, when there’s work to do here on earth?

Christ isn’t asking all of us to preach. Paul acknowledges as much, telling Ephesians today: some are apostles, some preachers, some evangelists, others teachers...but all called to build up the body of Christ.

Jesus, however, is asking something more, something even harder: he is asking us to be his witnesses.

On one level, that’s a challenge—because witness actually means “martyr.” The book of Revelation uses this term to describe those who faithfully proclaim the truth of the

gospel and who, by the sincerity of their witness suffered death. They are called faithful witnesses.

And now, more than ever, it is a challenge looming large around the world. But there is more than one kind of martyrdom.

There is the everyday martyrdom of selflessness and sacrifice.

There is the martyrdom of not having the last word.

There is the martyrdom of forgiving those who have done us wrong—a boss, a friend, a spouse.

And the everyday martyrdom of simply being a witness to the Gospel often involves something we find increasingly elusive: mercy.

How much mercy do we really witness in the world? How much do we witness at the office? Or even around your kitchen table?

How much are we being merciful? How much are we living, *truly* living, the Gospel in our daily lives? **Are we? Only individually we can answer that.**

So, where do we begin? The answer has been before us all along. Over the last few weeks, what has been the one recurring theme in the Sunday readings?

Love.

Love one another. We have heard it again and again in the readings - and for good reason.

Being a follower of Christ means looking deep down inside ourselves and seeing what is really in our hearts. It means sometimes having to swim upstream against the flow when the world is forcing us to go downstream. It means being willing to stick with our principles when all we hear is ‘everybody’s doing it!’ Or “don’t be a prude!”

That’s where we begin - making that choice - living that choice. And making that choice visible to a doubting and disbelieving world—a world that, as the Pew Study shows, is increasingly turning away from Christ.

Our mission is to change that. We had several options today for the reading from Ephesians (the letter of St Paul)...and I looked at all of them. What we heard read to us was Ephesians 1:17-23. In Ephesians 4, St. Paul puts it beautifully when he says: **“Live in a manner worthy of the calling you have received,” he tells the Ephesians (and us) “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love.”**

And he tells the Ephesians that “Jesus gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers, to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...”

Christ isn't asking all of us to preach. Paul acknowledges as much, telling Ephesians "some are apostles, some preachers, some evangelists, others teachers...but all called to build up the body of Christ. All of us matter in the body of Christ.

We all have different talents. Jesus asks us to use those talents and go out to the whole world to spread the good news and bring others to Christ.

Love is not static. It is active.

The first word Jesus speaks in the gospel today is our imperative: "Go."

It's also one of the last words said at the end of Mass:

"Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life."

Today, following Mass, I have the privilege once again to participate in the Annual Blessing of the Bikes at UD Welcome Stadium with Fr Dale Peterka from Cincinnati as our Presider and a cadre of deacons from various parishes throughout the Archdiocese. We'll read from the scriptures and pray with more than 10,000 people of all faiths in asking God's blessings on all of them (riders and their motorcycles) for their safety in the coming year. That's 10,000+ people quietly listening to the Word of God and then joining together to recite the Lord's Prayer. And finally, we'll go out to all of them, blessing them with holy water before they leave the stadium grounds.

This morning, here in this sacred space, we'll lift our hands in blessing on our graduates as they pass from one chapter of their lives to another. Together, we'll ask God to bestow blessings on them and instill in them the courage of the Holy Spirit so that they may go into the world and preach the gospel by living their lives as Paul calls all of us to do..."in a manner worthy of the calling you have received."

To all of us, I say...keep a strong prayer life...don't become a statistic in the Pew report. Pray for the courage to be always witnesses to the Gospel so that when the times comes for us to stand before God, we can acknowledge that we did the best we could.

The challenge before all of us is to do that in every moment and in every choice. If we all do that, we just might change those statistics about Christianity. And who knows - we also just might change the world.

(Excerpts from Deacon Greg Kandra, Brooklyn, NY)

Deacon Greg Cecere

May 17, 2015