

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today at the 10:30 Mass, twenty-two second graders and three fourth graders will receive their First Communion. We pray for and congratulate them and their families. I am always moved by our First Communicants' faith in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. As we pray for them, we should also pray that our own faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist will be strengthened.

We refer to the Eucharist as Holy Communion. According to the Second Vatican Council, "By her relationship with Christ, the Church is a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all [hu]mankind. She is also an instrument for the achievement of such union and unity" [LG 1]. We believe that when we receive Holy Communion, we not only symbolize but also deepen our union with God and our unity with one another begun in baptism.

Today's Gospel offers a powerful image of communion in the vine and the branches. Life flows through the vine and the branches. The other important part of the image is that healthy branches bear much fruit. One could say that the fruit is all the good that we do. However, one could also argue that the good fruit is our evangelizing witness that brings others to Christ and Christ to others.

In today's second reading, St. John tells us that "*God is greater than our hearts and knows everything.*" In other words, God alone knows the secrets of our hearts, and, therefore, God alone can judge us. However, when we say God is greater than our hearts, we are also saying that his love far exceeds our love. Because God's love exceeds our love, God's mercy, both his forgiveness and compassion, exceeds any love we can imagine.

In this reading, St. John suggests that God has one two-part commandment for us: "*we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us.*" God's one commandment, then, is to believe in Jesus and love one another, which for John are inseparable. As St. James reminded us, "*For just as a body without a spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead*" [2:26].

We all know love is the most overused word in the English language. Therefore, St. John wrote, "*Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth.*" Once again, this injunction of St. John has two parts. First, we all know that the word *love* is meaningless unless we translate it into deeds or actions that demonstrate love. The more challenging part is to understand what it means to love in truth. To love in truth is to love as Jesus loved: "*This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends*" [Jn. 15:12-13]. Authentic love, love in truth, is always self-revealing, self-giving, and self-sacrificing.

My brothers and sisters, in today's first reading, we are told that St. Paul "*spoke out boldly in the name of the Lord.*" If we are going to evangelize, we have to be willing to speak and act boldly. In "Rejoice and Be Glad," Pope Francis wrote, "Holiness... is boldness, an impulse to evangelize and to leave a mark in this world" [129]. In his address to the Synod on the Family, Pope Francis challenged the Synod fathers to speak boldly but to listen humbly. If we are going to build unity and community in the church, if we are going to evangelize effectively, we will need both to speak boldly and listen humbly.