

Heavenly Father, may the words I speak be those You want spoken, may the words we hear be those You want heard, and may we live to Your glory through hearts, minds and lives that are ready to be challenged, and changed, as you lead us.

We begin with the first reading in Acts. Paul was chosen by God to be a missionary to the Gentiles, to share the true identity of the “unknown God”. So, in Paul’s sermon to the Athenians at Areopagus, he begins by complimenting the Gentiles on their spirituality. However, he quickly moves into providing evidence of their lack of knowledge of God’s true identity by observing objects of their worship, including an altar that dons an inscription of ‘To an unknown God’, and thus they are worshipping objects and not a personal God. Paul goes on to explain that the object of true worship should be God, the creator, and he reminds the Gentiles that God has allotted the time of our existence and the boundaries of the places where we may live and thus we are at the mercy of God. And it is through this relationship between God and humanity that we are to search, or possibly grope, for God so that we might “find”, or in actuality, come into relationship with God because Paul shares the hope that God is not far from anyone. To create false idols of God made out of whatever material that at that time represents financial prosperity, such as gold, silver, or stone, is not what God is calling us to do. Instead God has overlooked these examples of human ignorance, but God’s patience with humanity is coming to an end in that God is commanding everyone to repent because God will be sending his son, Jesus, to the world through whom God will judge the world.

When I first read this reading what came to my mind is the times in my life where I have found myself adrift. Desperately trying to hold onto anything or anyone. I have to believe we have all found ourselves faced with challenges that seem insurmountable at times. And although God is not visible to us in a way in which humans understand “seeing” someone, based on what is written in this reading in Acts, God plays a pivotal role in our life in that God decides the length and trajectory of our lives. And throughout our lives, God is not far from us, but God is waiting for us to search for him, or in times of chaos, we might actually grope for him because we are so overwhelmed with anxiety or fear that we are paralyzed and thus can only reach out our hand in desperation that there is someone to grasp it. The irony is that in this reading, it suggests that God needs to implement challenging times in our lives in order for us to have the impetus to want to search for him and in turn, be and remain in relationship with him. Now, I am not going to go down the road of the ongoing Christian

debate of freewill versus predestination, but this reading definitely ticks a point on the predestination side of the board.

Now in our next reading, I feel it is important to give some context to this passage in 1 Peter. In Asia Minor there are those who have allegiance to Jesus as the only Lord and because of this, these people are being slandered and spoken to in malicious ways because there are those around them whom engage in temple worship involving multiple gods. So, simply put, the followers of Jesus are essentially rebelling against the authority within their community, but Peter is advising them to abide by the expectations of their secular leader as much as possible so as to silence the foolish people. So, this provides the context of why Peter asks the question of “Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?” Peter is trying to reassure Jesus’ followers by telling them they are blessed, to have no fear, and to not be intimidated, but also to remind them to reflect on whether they are doing what they are doing out of their allegiance to Jesus versus some other less noble reason. He emphasizes the importance of sharing Jesus’ message respectfully, humbly, and honorably so that they will remain above reproach even if they are slandered by others in their community. We must be ready to defend why we do what we do, but do it with gentleness and reverence. And Peter goes on to use Jesus as the example of what we are to emulate to give Jesus’ followers hope in their mission so that they might persevere in the face of ridicule and insult. And through following Jesus’ mission, we can look forward to absolution because we have the knowledge that we will ultimately be saved, albeit there will be suffering in our journey to salvation. And here in this passage, we can tick another point for the predestination side of the board in that Peter tells us that “...it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will...”

When I reflected on the reading from 1 Peter, I immediately thought of times in my life when I have been faced with doing the “hard right”. I, as I am sure many or all of you, have found yourself in situations in which you had to do what was “right” versus what was easy. Maybe it was an experience in school where a fellow classmate was being bullied. As you witnessed this event, did you stay silent or did you do the “hard right” and stand up for the classmate being bullied and in so doing, potentially place a bullseye on your back where the bully might decide to target you? Or maybe you witnessed an event in your career where a coworker violated

company policy? Did you report it or did you pretend you were not aware of it happening? Ultimately, it's a challenge to do the "right thing" because secular society often rewards people who achieve what are perceived as great accomplishments and focus less on whether these people were willing to do whatever it took to get where they are in life. Society chooses to ignore all the wrong that might have led to a person becoming a false god, one whom many may emulate and worship. Ironically, when I was growing up, we were taught what was "right", such as not to lie or cheat, and yet somewhere along the way from moving from being a child to adult, those rules seemed to change. But, the hope is in that there are followers of Jesus in the world who are willing to do the "hard right" even if they are not rewarded with jewels, money, and expensive cars. They do what is right because they know that we are called to use Jesus as the example of how we should live our lives, every day, all the time, and there are no weekends or holidays off from living into this call.

Now we move onto our final reading for today from John chapter 14 where Jesus is speaking to his disciples. Jesus is imploring them to prove their love for him through keeping his commandments. What might seem like a simple request, we can recognize as flawed humans ourselves, as an ongoing challenge that we are called to rise to each and every day in all that we do and in relation to all of whom we come in contact with. And it is through keeping Jesus' commandments that we are given what Jesus calls "another Advocate", which we understand to be the Holy Spirit, which we are truly blessed to have living within us. But, Jesus is clear that the Holy Spirit cannot be received by the world because it is neither seen nor known by non-believers. You must be in relationship with God in order for the Holy Spirit to dwell within us and in turn, be a direct umbilical cord to our Lord and Savior. And Jesus goes on to reassure his disciples that although soon they will not be able to physically see him, it will be through honoring his example and following his message and mission, that they will be loved by God the Father, loved by Jesus, and Jesus will be revealed within them as the Holy Spirit. This is the intimate unity between Jesus, God the Father, the Holy Spirit, and the believer who are all working together for one mission. I do not know about you, but this sparks a beautiful vision of a quadrinity in absolute harmony held together by bonds that are stronger than any material one can find or even imagine on God's earth.

So, we have now come full circle with the theme that ties all of today's readings together. Each of these readings sends the unifying message that we must repent, we must come to have a deep understanding of Jesus and his mission, we must do our best to emulate Jesus' example and spread the message of love to all we meet, we must do what is good with a clear conscience, even when it is difficult and even when we may be intimidated, scorned, or mocked for our beliefs, we must honor Jesus by keeping his commandments, and most importantly we must begin by searching for God, or when necessary grope for him. Because it is through our faith in God that we have the reassurance of his grace, his presence in our lives, and the promise of salvation. So we must remain persistent in our belief of God's unconditional love, even if others challenge us for having this belief, and in turn, we are charged with sharing that same love with others in all that we say and do. But, we need to begin with self-love, then love of Jesus which is manifested by keeping his commandments, and finally loving all others, even when it can feel impossible to do so.

Now the first step may seem simple, but loving one's self is rarely simple because society teaches us to feel guilt and shame and to repeatedly blame ourselves for decisions we made that may have been completely out of our control and yet had negative consequences for ourselves and possibly those around us. Yet if we cannot love ourselves, this creates a barrier to receiving the love of Christ even though Jesus loves us when we are at our best and when we are at our worst. So, in order to honor the unconditional love that Jesus offers us, we must not fear this amazing gift of love, but must work at having self-love so that we can be a part of the quadrinity and ultimately share that same love with others so that they themselves can also be blessed to be a part of the quadrinity. Amen.