

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

'Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do.'

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People care for their own. It is part of our nature. Perhaps part of our fallen nature; yet nature it is. We take care of those who we believe to be part of our circle. We leave those who are part of another circle to their own.

But in the Church, there is no Greek or Jew, there is neither slave nor free, no male nor female; for all are one in Christ.

This is a lesson hard taught, to ignore those earthly bonds of affinity, those of kinship and kind, and instead view one another [not as father and mother, sister, brother, countryman but] as 'Christians', the name for which men do not merely bleed, as blood is thicker than water, but die, for the font has made water thicker than blood, and wine thicker than all the world.

Even in the Church, those who were of the Jews and of the Gentiles still separated themselves from one another. There was to be a *distribution*, that is, the Church was to take care of its own poor, its own needy. Yet when it came time to care for these, the old lines of solidarity, Jew against Greek, slave against free, rose up, and *widows were neglected*.

This is an intolerable problem, for our God draws *all nations unto himself, and is no respecter of persons*. Yet it did not seem proper to the Church that those who pray and preach and teach be burdened further by tending to the holy, beautiful, but yet still worldly needs of those who hunger. They cannot be ignored, for such is godless to ignore the needy, but to tend to those who hunger of body, and to tend to those who hunger of soul; the Apostles determined that such tasks

belonged to different people.

Therefore, the diaconate was established by the proclamation of the very disciples of Christ, and deacons and deaconesses were consecrated; an apostolic institution which this very congregation rejoices in.

So Stephen, the first deacon, was chosen, that he might serve the body of the Church, born of earth; even as the priesthood, that is, those following the succession of the Apostles, might serve the soul of the Church, born of God; for in the resurrection, both body and soul shall be raised; therefore, let both be served as equal, great and glorious creations of the Lord.

The Lord Christ in our Gospel reading speaks to His disciples. He asks a simple request: *'Believe in my God; believe also in me.'* When the disciples are confused, asking that Jesus *'show them the Father'*, the Lord responds: *'Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.'*

'Believe on account of the works.'

These works, what are they? It would seem obvious that *the works* must be His miracles. His turning water into wine. His healing of the blind. His purging of the possessed.

Yet Christ belittles these works. He belittles His own miracles, for He says that those who follow Him will do works as He does; but greater works than these simple miracles.

People misunderstand miracles, believing them to be God's way of rewarding the faithful in times of great suffering or trial. This is not so. The Lord gives miracles because we are a *stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, and always resisting the Holy Spirit, as our fathers did before us*. A miracle is not a reward for faith, but a poison that drives out the poison of faithlessness. Indeed, *'a wicked and adulterous generation asks for signs.'* The world is already filled with wonder; the Lord of Hosts need only add wonders to it because of our blindness; because we will not see.

Therefore, Christ esteems not His miraculous doings, for they are but a bandage for sick and injured men, who have no faith.

But to those *who believe in him*, they shall *also do the works that I do*.

The Lord Christ does not speak of His miracles, but of the *greater works* that will be done by His grace won by his *going to the Father*.

What is this greater work? What is greater than healing the sick and raising the dead? *The Lord exalts the lowly*. And indeed, the greater work the Son of Man speaks of is that work which all mankind spits upon. It is that lowliest of things; that most unscientific, most unenlightened, most foolish of things; that thing that we deride as 'faith.'

Yet this faith is not mere assent to a series of religious facts. It is the invincible trust in the will of the Father. Even when all hell assails us, it is not mere assent that will give us strength to endure the fight, but faith, that is, derision for all the cacophony and prattling of this world, and loyalty to the will and Word of the Almighty.

Christ shows us this greater work; He shows us faith, for as He says Himself: '*I am going to the Father*.' And there is but one path, one way to His Father, and that is through His cross, His Passion, His Hell. These things He endures, for above any miracle, He does a greater work.

'Whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do.'

The works that the Lord does; the work of Passion; the work of suffering; the work of obedience to the seemingly absurd will of God in a seemingly lost and hateful world; to be delivered up to strangers and accusers; to be reviled and mocked; to be scourged and beaten; to be crucified, that those *who know not what they do* might know; that those *who are blind* might see.

The Lord does such greater works, for He is going to the Father, that *the Father might be glorified in the Son*.

The first deacon, this Saint Stephen, does a greater work than all the miracles of Christ, for He imitates the greatest work of Christ, for he trusts in Christ even the darkest hour of hell. For having served the poor, the orphan, the widow, in senseless outrage *'they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears, and rushed together at him. They cast him out of the city and stoned him.'*

And as the stone struck his skull outside the walls of the city, and blood filled his throat, he spoke the only words which innocent blood can speak, a greater work than all miracles. *'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'*

'May his blood be on us and our children.'

For his blood was born of faith, even as his faith was born of the Son of Man, who alone believed in the Father. May then, the stone cast away at this martyr be *a cornerstone, chosen and precious,*

'For whoever believes in Christ will not be put to shame.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Acts

6:1-9, 7:2, 51-60; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14.