

LECTIO  
SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER  
Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM

Good afternoon, on this final Sunday before we celebrate, on Ascension Thursday, the definitive return of the earthly Jesus, now fully glorified by his Resurrection from the dead, to the One who sent Him, whom He called, in the idiom of his earthly experience, “Father.” The Gospel we read today is actually part of the 4 chapter long Last Discourse(s) of Jesus to his disciples before his death, and it appears only in the Gospel of John. That discourse, or speech, chapters 14-17 of John’s Gospel, we read in Holy Week as if it were a single, uninterrupted speech delivered by Jesus at the Last Supper to his disciples after He had washed their feet and before Judas betrays Him and He goes to the Garden to undertake his saving Passion and Death.

This four chapters long Last Supper Discourse of Jesus of which today’s reading is the first pericope, is actually modeled on the lengthy discourse of Moses just before the Chosen People, whom God had freed from slavery in Egypt and led for 40 years in the desert journey to the Promised Land, were to cross the Jordan and settle in the place that God would give them and in which God would preserve them if they chose to keep the Covenant God was making with them. Moses, in that “farewell discourse” exhorts the Chosen People to enter into this Covenant with God, to “choose life,” and thus to settle in the Promised Land, and live long as the People of God.

In John's Gospel, Jesus is presented as the New Moses, leading a New Chosen People, which, unlike Israel, would not be defined by blood relationship but, like Israel, would be identified by their choice to live by a New Law, the Law of Love that Jesus would now outline for them in this long Last Discourse.

Everything that Jesus will propose as the New Law by which this New People of God will live is summed up in Jesus' ceremonial washing of his disciples' feet, symbolizing his service of them unto death. He then asks them if they have understood his action (which, of course, they had not) and so He proceeds to unpack it for them. That instruction is what we call the "Last Discourses," John 14-17, and it begins in this pericope, which opens with words reminiscent of Moses' words to the ancient Israelites. Just as Moses had told the people that if they loved God their savior they would embrace the Law which God had revealed through Moses and thus live long and well in the land that God was giving them, so Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." This is not so much a condition for salvation as an expression of the choice to enter into this covenant, a covenant of love like that of a couple speaking to each other their vows of love unto death in all the conditions and challenges that married life might raise.

So Jesus begins by saying, "If you love me, it will be manifest by and in your keeping of my commandments," that is, in your living as I have lived, and although I am going away in my earthly, visible, physical bodiliness — my self-presentation as a mortal human — I am returning to you in/as deathless Spirit in whom/ by whom, I will dwell within you as I have dwelt among you — but now, forever. This Spirit, which is my presence within and among you, is the Spirit of

Truth Who can only be experienced, known, seen by those who love and are united to me.” And Jesus assures them that that experience of His indwelling Spirit, or more exactly of Himself indwelling them as Spirit, will make them realize — not just or even understand in explicit rational terms — but *know* in the depths of their own experience that they are one with Him, that He indwells them, and therefore, like Him, they are one through sharing in his Spirit with the God he called, and they now can call, Parent — which in Jesus’ historical culture would be expressed in terms of fatherhood, even though, in Jesus’ culture, as today, true Jewish parenthood is established by motherhood, so Mother is as appropriate as Father but would not have been understood that way in Jesus’ time.

Like Moses who challenged the Hebrews to embrace and be identified by their keeping of the Law given to Moses by God on Mt. Sinai, Jesus says to his disciples, “If you love me, if you choose to be my disciples and to have my Father as your Father, you will accept and keep this New Law which I am giving you. You will not be orphans when I, the New Moses, have gone up the mountain of Calvary to God, but I will be present to and in you in the Spirit of Truth, the Advocate or comforter, whom I will give you as my presence in you when I have gone to the Father.” He tells them, as Moses told Israel, that they would be recognized as his disciples, the new People of God, by their keeping of the New Law, the Law of Love he was giving them in the gift of the Spirit.

Jesus goes on to make an extraordinary promise: “I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you *will see me*, because I live and you will live. On that day [not after death or in the next world] you *will realize* that I am in the Father and you in me and I in you.”

We probably tend to instantly turn this promise into a metaphor, indeed an empty metaphor, a kind of hyperbolic expression of God's invisible, intangible, presence which we believe keeps us in existence as it does all beings but is available to us only as a tenet of faith. But Jesus is saying to his disciples that they will *see* Him. And he contrasts their *real seeing* with the experience of "the world," that is, non-believers. He says that non-believers, the world, which has seen him, physically, which has indeed arrested and killed him, will no longer see him. BUT, Jesus' disciples *will see him*, because He lives and his disciples live. And on that basis, on the basis of their ongoing seeing of him, they will know the great reality that He, Jesus, is *in the Father*, and that his disciples (i.e., us) are in him. That because He lives, we live.

This promise of Jesus that we will *see* — that is sensibly experience — him, not just in heaven after we die, but here and now, in the mystery of his real bodily Resurrection and living bodily presence among us, is what we have been being asked to ponder during this six week period between Easter and Pentecost. That's the point of the narratives of the appearances of Jesus over the 40 days between Easter and the Ascension which we will celebrate this Thursday. That 40 days is an intensive course on how Jesus is and will always be present to his disciples, not as a ghost or a figment of our imagination or a memory of someone dead and gone — but also not as a resuscitated physical corpse. The Resurrection initiates something unknown until Jesus, something we could never have imagined nor dreamed up, something that has no precedent or analogue in the great religions of the world. Bodily, not fleshly or physical but bodily, Resurrection is a Christian

original. It is the basis, the *conditio sine qua non*, the necessary condition for seeing the Risen Jesus, the Jesus Risen in Our Midst.

In order to enter into this promise, to actually *see* the Risen Jesus we need a new instrumentality, what the Church's first theologians called, a new set of "senses" — a spiritual sight, hearing, tasting, touching — that are awakened in us by Baptism, the Easter sacrament, and matured by the gift of the Spirit, and nurtured by our life of putting on Christ through contemplation of him in Scripture, relationship with him through community, acting in his person through ministry. This is not make-believe or wishful thinking. Jesus assures us: "I will come to you...you will see me....because I live you will live....you will realize that ...you are in me and I in you."

The challenge we face as, or if, we mature in the spiritual life is how to recognize and cooperate with and develop this capacity — which we believe was given to us in Baptism — to actually *experience* the Risen Jesus, not as an imaginary phantom of some sort, or a dream or wishful thinking, or a contentless "act of faith." This is where we need, in theology, a contemporary understanding of the ancient but centuries long forgotten, theory and cultivation of the spiritual senses. But all of us, not just religious or theological specialists, have to learn to recognize, to cultivate, to appropriate, to live out in and through our mundane life experience of friendship, marital love, selfless and socially transformative ministry to Christ's body in this world, suffering, creative imagination, and all the other ways in which the Incarnation continues in our world, the real presence of the Risen Jesus whom we are also called to BE in time and space.

When Jesus says that “in a little while”, that is, when he has emerged from death in Resurrection, in our time and in this world, we will “see him” because He lives, here and now and among us, and we will live, he is not talking about the *imaginary*, the fanciful, the stuff of gullible dreams, pious projections. He is talking about the *imaginative*, the real that manifests itself in and through but not as reductively identical with, our concrete experience in this world. This is what we are striving to realize in our lives as we learn to see with the eyes of faith not “what is not really there,” the purely imaginary, but precisely to really see what is really there but available only to the one with eyes spiritually empowered by the baptismal waters, to see, and ears to hear not what is actually silence but precisely what is being communicated to us in and through the Word of God.

Jesus says in the passage we are meditating on today that the one who accepts and makes one’s own Jesus’ teaching, who undertakes to live according to Jesus’ commandments which are all summed up in the one great command to “love one another as I have loved you.” will be loved by God and Jesus will himself love that person and reveal himself to that person.

The words we have been playing on in this reflection: Jesus revealing through the senses (seeing, hearing, touching, tasting) not replaced by but transformed by, super-empowered by, the gift of the Spirit involve a whole spirituality rooted in the incarnation, the taking on and transformation by God of bodily humanity, the human perception of the divine, and issuing in the real experience of actual Resurrection. Incredible as this can sound in our extremely materialistic and even physicalist, reductive, scientific, “show me the money,” “it’s the economy, stupid,” world order, the economy of the Resurrection which the

Church proclaims and we receive, is real. Its acceptance and incorporation into our lives as the real economy, the real way things really are if our Baptism-washed sight can see into, through, to the really real, the real that we experience when we fall in love, when we are transported by the beautiful, when our mind explodes with insight, when revelation reaches us in the depths of our being, can take us into a new world, a new reality construction, from which and out of which we can engage in realistic hope, the project of recreation which is what Easter is all about.