

[Readings: Acts 9:26-31; Psalm 22; 1 John 3:18-24; John 15:1-8]

Have you ever heard the expression, “Make yourself at home?” That means that you are a guest in someone’s home, and they want you to feel as if it is your home. There is an Italian expression that says you should only visit for no longer than three days: “Ospidi sono come pesce, dopo tre giorni, puta!” Guests are like fish, after three days you have to throw them out!

There is an important word in two of our three Readings this morning: “remain.” In the original Greek, the word means to dwell, or to indwell, to make a home inside. That’s what Jesus wants to do with each one of us. He wants to make a home within our hearts. How do we do this? He says, by keeping His commandments.

Have you heard of the Ten Commandments? That’s part of what we have to do. We have to follow all of the Ten Commandments given to us by God in the Old Testament. But we also have to become people of the Beatitudes in the New Testament. “Beatitude” means, blessed or happy. Blessed are you when you do this or do that. If we do both things, follow the commandments and do the Beatitudes, God lives in us and we live in God.

Today’s Gospel talks about vines and branches. Most of us are city people, and we don’t know much about this kind of work. But those who do work in vineyards know two things: you have to keep the vines off the ground, and you have to prune or trim the branches to keep them healthy and to produce much fruit. If you leave a grape vine on the ground, each of the individual branches will try to take root in the ground. Each branch competes for the soil, the nutrients and the water, and they don’t survive. By themselves, whatever grapes are produced are small, tiny and bitter. You cannot eat them and you cannot use them to make wine.

The Italians were the first to build what we call trellises. These are wooden frames, usually in the shape of arches that you would rap the vines around to keep them off the ground and expose them to the sunlight. Their branches would produce big, juicy grapes. But the branches need to be trimmed to bring forth fruit, and, most importantly, the branches need to be connected to the vine in order to receive food, nutrients and water. If the branches are cut off from the vine, the branches die.

If we are connected with the Lord, the St. John says, “Ask whatever you want, and it will be given to you.” OK Lord, I want five million dollars, a Mercedes, and live in a million dollar home!” Will Jesus give this to me because I asked for it? No, because

there is a very important condition: We need to be doing God's will, and not ours.

If everything we think, say and do is according to God's will, then whatever we ask God we will receive because we are doing what GOD wants us to do, NOT what WE want to do! This is how we stay connected with Jesus. Perhaps a visual demonstration might help. I need my little friends who are making their First Holy Communion to come up and help me. Please come up and stand in front of the altar. You will be the branches, and I will be Jesus, the True Vine.

[The First Communicants come up and form a single line in front of the altar.]

This reminds me of a story about me and my brother David. When we were in grade school, one day we came home from school and asked our Mom for a snack. There were only two chocolate chip cookies left. One was really, really big, and the other one was a regular size. David and I fought about who should get the larger cookie. My mom said, "You know, if one of you was Jesus, He would give the bigger cookie to the other one." My brother David looked at me and said, "Nick, YOU be Jesus!" So I will be Jesus again today!

Now look at how happy all of us are when we join our hands and are joined to Jesus. See how happy, strong and healthy we are? [Children join hands with Fr. Nick. They are standing tall and smiling.]

Now, look what happens when we cut ourselves off from Jesus. Our leaves get heavy and droop, and our branches begin to wilt and wither. [Children pretend to be wilting, slouching with their heads to one side, their arms limp at their side]. What is so sad is how so many people are walking around with drooping spirits and wilted lives. They are cut off from Jesus. But if they come back to Jesus, and join hands with Him and with each other, they become happy and healthy again. [Children once again join hands with Fr. Nick and are "restored" to their happy, healthy selves.]

Parents, make sure you keep your children spiritually happy and healthy. Bring them to Church every week, so that they can be nourished spiritually by Jesus in Holy Communion. Every day, help them and help yourselves – and everyone -- to ask Jesus to come into your hearts and to "Make Yourself at Home!" AMEN!