

JUNE 1, 2014: SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 1:12-14 I Peter 4:13-16 John 17:1-11a

Once Christianity developed a hierarchical structure biblical passages originally directed to all believers started to be applied to just a privileged few. Eventually we saw the creation of clergy and laity, a caste system the historical Jesus seems to have passionately despised. Proponents of his non-biblical split among the faithful earmarked many of our most important biblical texts for the clergy and left the laity to simply ooh and aah over the prerogatives of this special group.

This is especially true for today's gospel pericope. One of the seminaries I attended, for instance, proclaimed this passage immediately before the institution's post-ordination meal. The reader always began by labeling it, "Christ's prayer for his newly ordained priests."

John would never have understood this "modern" designation. The fourth evangelist presumed everything his Jesus said was directed to all his followers, not just to one special group. Yet it's easy to see how later Christians turned this into a prayer for priests only.

First, ignoring the gospel fact that many women accompanied Jesus on his fateful Jerusalem Passover pilgrimage and that logically this group would have eaten such an important meal together, some started to limit Last Supper attendance to the "Twelve Apostles." Then after a few centuries, when the priesthood as we know it eventually appeared, other commentators began to contend that Jesus actually "ordained" these special individuals priests during that last meal. One upshot of such biblical mismanagement was that whatever John's Jesus said during his final get-together with his disciples was directed only to his priests. Given this uncritical interpretation of the fourth gospel's Last Supper narrative it made sense to take this pericope out of its original context and use it to introduce an ordination banquet.

As today's gospel is being proclaimed, please hear it as John intended it to be heard. Jesus is praying for all of us Christians. We are those who "know the only true God, and the one whom (God) sent, Jesus Christ." Each of us has kept his word and, and like him, have constantly tried to change the world we inhabit. No wonder he prays for us. "I do not pray for the world but for the ones you have given me, because they are yours, and everything of mine is yours and everything of yours is mine, and I have been glorified in them." Because all of us are committed to becoming other Christs, we need lots of prayers, especially the prayers of the person we try to imitate.

As the author of I Peter reminds his community, if Jesus whom we imitate suffered, then we shouldn't be surprised if we suffer. We actually "share in the sufferings of Christ." The risen Jesus suffers through us and comes to life through us. "Whoever is made to suffer as a Christian," he writes, "should not be ashamed but glorify God because of the name."

Of course, certain perks accompany such suffering. As we'll hear next Sunday, those who carry on Jesus' ministry receive Jesus' Spirit. That seems to be one of the reasons Luke clicks off the people gathered in that Last Supper upper room awaiting their Pentecost surprise. Like the signers of our Declaration of Independence helped create a nation, the Spirit morphed Jesus' first followers into a church. We'd expect the Eleven to be in that room, but notice Luke also mentions "some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers" were part of that unique group - a rather broad, diverse congregation.

All serious students of Scripture gradually discover that through the centuries some well-known institutions have methodically excluded parts of our sacred authors' most inclusive beliefs.

JUNE 8, 2014: PENTECOST
Acts 2:1-11 I Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13 John 20:19-23

Though Luke and John disagree on the date of the Spirit's first arrival, along with Paul they insist that the Spirit's an essential element of the Christian community's experience.

All three attempt to answer the same question. If Jesus isn't among us any longer in his historical body, how can we be certain we're carrying on his ministry the way we're supposed to? Their answer is the same: Those who carry on Jesus' ministry have Jesus' Spirit.

Luke situates the Spirit's arrival on the Jewish feast of Pentecost: the day on which Yahweh's followers especially remembered the covenant they made with him/her on Mount Sinai. That formal agreement transformed a bunch of runaway slaves into the people of God. Luke reasoned that Jesus' followers became God's new community when they received the Holy Spirit. The reception of that Spirit was the outward sign they were committed to the same unique covenant with Yahweh that Jesus had made during his earthly ministry.

John, on the other hand, has the Spirit arrive on Easter Sunday night, reinforcing his theology that those who commit themselves to die and rise with Jesus will quickly discover they have the same Spirit guiding them which guided their mentor. The Spirit's an automatic "byproduct" of one's coming to life with Jesus.

Yet, each of today's writers is also convinced that the Spirit provides opportunities for us to die over and over again with Jesus.

Notice that the images Luke employs to accompany the Spirit's infusion are wind, noise and fire – all rather violent phenomena. Though the Spirit might at times bring us some longed-for consolation, on most occasions the Spirit leaves us with lots of consternation. If we're open to receiving Jesus' Spirit, then we've open to the disturbing forces which led him to suffer and die. We shouldn't be surprised to experience some agonies in the garden, or in the living room, or in the car, when we realize the implications of carrying on Jesus' ministry. Being other Christs is the most fulfilling part of our existence, but the Spirit sees to it that it's also the most disturbing.

John deliberately hooks up the Spirit's arrival with our forgiveness of one another's sins. His Jesus seems to believe that only the Spirit can enable us to actually accomplish such a feat. Without giving ourselves over to the Spirit working in our lives, we'd be doing much more retaining than forgiving. Those whom Jesus sends forth with the Spirit are expected to carry out the Spirit's forgiveness.

In chapters 12, 13, and 14 of I Corinthians, Paul explores the phenomenon of the Spirit's habit of bringing us together at the same time he/she tempts us to tear ourselves apart. As he states in today's pericope, each of us has a part of the Spirit "for some benefit." We're blessed with the Spirit's gifts for the common good. Yet as the Apostle discovered, we can employ our special gifts for the detriment, not the benefit of the community. He's forced to begin his section on the Spirit by reminding his readers, "There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; different forms of service but the same Lord; different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone." He believes we're as diverse as individual parts of a body, yet as one as that same body. We constantly have to learn how to live in the midst of that God-given tension.

Perhaps that's why, as a child, the only time I called on the Spirit was during exams. It was too much of a hassle to have the Spirit around at other times.