

MAY 7TH, 2017: FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 2:14a, 36-41 I Peter 2:20b-25 John 10:1-10

There's no more important question in all of Scripture than which comes from the Pentecost crowd in today's first reading: "What are we to do, my brothers?" In other words, "How, in the biblical sense, are we to be saved?"

Most of us aren't familiar with the "biblical" concept of salvation. As the late Marcus Borg points out in his 2011 book *Speaking Christian*, we hear the term today within a heaven-hell framework. Salvation for most of us simply means we eventually get into heaven instead of being sent to hell. As a Scripture scholar, Borg clearly demonstrates that our sacred authors' concept of being "saved" is much broader than the simple heaven-hell framework in which we modern Christians place it. Among other things, the biblical quest for salvation implies we live a meaningful, rewarding life right here and now, long before we actually go through those pearly gates.

It's within that traditional biblical framework that we must hear Peter's response: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Notice he doesn't say anything about getting into heaven or going to hell. He's concerned only with the here and now.

"Repent," in this context, seems to be an invitation to change one's value system; to judge people and situations from a totally new perspective – to acquire Jesus Christ's point of view, the individual in whose name they're to be baptized. This 180 degree change of moral positioning results in our becoming a totally new person, someone no longer responsible for the sins the old, dead person committed. It's also at this point that we receive Jesus' Spirit, the force that not only points us in the right direction, but also provides us with the determination and power to achieve the goals that new orientation uncovers for us. What more fulfilling, meaningful life could a person experience? That's how our sacred authors looked at salvation.

Our early Christian writers would have been befuddled by our kowtowing to an institutional authority structure, and relying on obedience to rules and regulations to get us into heaven. The unknown author of I Peter tells us the only thing we other Christs are obligated to do: ". . . follow in his footsteps."

That's why John takes the shepherd parables found in other gospels and applies the concept personally to Jesus. Only John's Jesus speaks about being the "good shepherd," and goes even further by reminding his community that he's the "gate for the sheep." Everything in a Christian's life revolves around his or her relationship with the risen Christ. That's the perspective from which we view everyone we meet, every situation we encounter. We're to filter our relationships through his/her frame of mind.

No wonder the earliest Christians believed the Holy Spirit was essential to their salvation. Only she could mesh the risen Jesus into their everyday lives, making this new creation's priorities their priorities.

I presume by submitting to an authority system and obeying all its rules and regulations, most of us will probably get into heaven one day. But I also presume a lot of first century CE Jews also were content to take that path of least resistance. They simply did what the priests and proto-rabbis told them to do and were content with their lives.

Then one day a carpenter from Capernaum visits their synagogues and offers them a new path to travel, one demanding a core change in their personalities. They're to put people and their needs at the center of their lives, and shove rules and regulations into the background.

I imagine many of them were happy to see him leave town.

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MAY 14TH, 2017: FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 6:1-7 I Peter 2:4-9 John 14:1-11

Serious students of Luke/Acts realize how exceptional today's first reading is. Usually, in depicting the early Christian community, Luke assures us that everything is going along hunky-dory. Jesus' first followers are living an ideal existence: constantly loving one another, always sharing their belonging and property with the needy, and continually growing in number. That's why today's "bump in the road" demands some explanation.

It's logical that communities made up of different cultural groups, each with their own languages, will eventually develop snags in their relationships. In this case, Greek speaking Hellenists are having problems with Aramaic speaking Hebrews. The issue revolves around the daily distribution of food to the community's widows.

The Twelve's way of resolving the conflict is actually more important for today's church than the solution itself. "Select from among you seven reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, whom we shall appoint to this task . . ." The seven chosen men are then listed. Except for providing a pronunciation obstacle for lectors, the names don't mean a lot to us. We might recognize Stephen and Philip, who will appear later in Acts, but the other five are easily forgotten.

I guarantee none of the seven would have been forgotten in the Jerusalem community. Each man is a Hellenist! If Greek speaking Christians are having a problem, then Greek speaking Christians are expected to solve their problem. Christian problems are solved from within, not from outside the community.

Growing up in a pre-Vatican II church, I presumed our revered pastor would have the answer to any parish crisis. I certainly wasn't alone in that belief. Remember the old story of the pastor who calls a parish meeting to discuss a pressing issue facing the parishioners? After announcing, "We have a problem," he's immediately challenged by a parishioner who reminds him, "The only way we could be having a problem, Father, is if you've got a mouse in your pocket."

The recent establishment of parish councils has given the "laity" some say in what happens in their faith community. But some priests (and bishops) are quick to remind the various council members that they're purely "advisory." The pastor (and bishop) still retain veto power over any of their suggestions. A far cry from the high esteem Luke, the author of I Peter and John's Jesus hold the Christian community.

"You are a chosen race," the writer of I Peter reminds his newly baptized catechumens, "a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his (God's) own, so that you may announce the praises of him who called you out of darkness into this wonderful light." How do one or two individuals wield veto power over such a prestigious group?

John's Jesus carries respect for the community even further. "'Whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater ones than these . . .'" The risen Jesus trusts all of us not just to carry on his/her ministry, but to go beyond what the historical Jesus was able to do between 6 BCE and 30 CE.

Ignoring Jesus' teachings, we eventually divided Christians into clergy and laity. One group became superior, the other subservient. One group called the shots, the other took the blows. We 21st century Catholics are witnesses of this; still suffering moral consequences 50 years after the church's hierarchical decision on birth control and today being forced to deal with ever-dwindling Eucharistic celebrations due to the artificial shortage of male, celibate priests.

The early followers of Jesus believed he left them a way to deal with such problems. But unless we dare to be committed to that way, our problems will certainly remain and increase.

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