

MAY 21st, 2017: SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 8:5-8, 14-17 I Peter 3:15-18 John 14:15-21

Many of us have a built-in problem keeping us from correctly understanding today's three readings. Our catechism-oriented education assured us we'd always know we're doing what Jesus wanted us to do as long as we're following the teachings of the institutional church. The Galilean carpenter deliberately set up that organization during his earthly ministry to guarantee his message would always be presented the way he intended it to be presented.

There's just one problem with that reasoning: modern Scripture scholars – like the late Raymond Brown – are unanimously convinced the historical Jesus never intended to found a church as we know it today. More than anything, he was simply a reformer of Judaism, not the founder of a new religion.

So if he didn't create a formal institution to carry on his ministry, what did he do to guarantee it would always be done the right way? As we hear in today's liturgical passages, he gave his followers his Spirit.

John's Jesus couldn't have said it better. "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows him. But you know him, because he remains with you and will be in you." According to John, only those who give themselves over to Jesus' Spirit are authentic other Christs.

That's why Luke believes it's essential for Peter and John to travel from Jerusalem up to Samaria to make certain that community's newly baptized actually have received Jesus' Spirit. Philip – knowing nothing of our modern Trinitarian formula - had only baptized them "in the name of the Lord Jesus." By the laying on of the apostles' hands, Jesus' Spirit also comes upon them. Their conversion is complete.

We have no idea what formula the author of I Peter employed in baptizing those to whom this homily is directed. But he certainly takes for granted they've received the Spirit in whatever action preceded his speaking to them. Just as the historical Jesus could defend his ministry and message, so they should be able to follow suit. This is important since suffering is always an integral part of carrying out that ministry and conveying that message. In the author's mind, a person's defense of being another Christ doesn't come in a harmless school exam, but in the midst of suffering. No reason to defend it unless we're in pain because of it. Our unknown writer is convinced that just as Jesus was "put to death in the flesh and was brought to life in the Spirit," so his Spirit gives us life especially when our suffering is most severe.

In some sense, it's easy to understand why many Christians quickly traded the Spirit for an institution. The late Carroll Stuhlmueller always taught that there are two rules to know when the Spirit's actually talking to us. First, what suddenly comes into our mind is an insight, not a process of reasoning. Two and two equals four, for instance, probably isn't from the Spirit. Inspiration from the Spirit comes out of nowhere. One instant there's nothing, then suddenly . . . !

Second, actually following through on what pops into our mind will cost us big time. The Spirit always demands we leave where we're comfortably ensconced and move to a place where we'd rather not be, a place which makes new demands on us. The Spirit never tells us, "Stay right here! Don't move a muscle!"

According to our sacred authors, only when we're disturbed about what God expects us to do can we be certain the risen Jesus' Spirit is actually at work in our lives.

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MAY 25th or 28th, 2017: ASCENSION OF THE LORD

Acts 1:1-11 Ephesians 1:17-23 Matthew 28:16-20

It's clear from today's first and third readings that our four evangelists often contradict one another, even about things we believe essential to our faith. Because of our liturgical calendar, we Catholics presume Jesus died on Good Friday, rose on Easter Sunday, ascended to heaven 40 days later, and sent the Spirit 10 days after that. Few of us realize that this chronology is only a re-enactment of Luke's theology, a theology every other evangelist contradicts.

Probably many of us will hear a homily today in which the speaker concentrates on Jesus' gospel words about being with us "until the end of the age," a promise, the homilist tells us, Jesus makes immediately before he ascends into heaven. Few priests or deacons notice today's gospel is from Matthew, an evangelist who never speaks about an ascension! Matthew's gospel ends where today's pericope ends. Matthew's risen Jesus is still "out there somewhere," appearing where and to whom he/she wishes, especially in our daily lives. Unlike Luke, Matthew's Jesus doesn't have a heavenly zip code.

For our sacred authors, Jesus' risen existence isn't as black and white as many of us presume. The Pauline disciple responsible for the letter to the Ephesians, for instance, feels comfortable conceiving of a glorified Christ "seated at God's right hand in the heavens, far above every principality, authority, power and dominion" In some sense, each writer zeros in on a particular aspect of the risen Jesus, and leaves others in the background.

One of the reasons Luke has Jesus definitively ascend revolves around his conviction that the risen Jesus' Spirit is now guiding the church. In his theology, we should be anticipating encounters with that Spirit, not with the actual risen Jesus. Luke seems to believe those encounters best take place when the Christ is taken out of the picture; thus his idea of a definitive resurrection.

In my own experience as a minister, I prefer the "he/she's still here" theology of the other three evangelists.

We usually presume the Spirit is going to communicate with us through our minds, not through the actual individuals with whom we come face to face in our daily lives. A risen Jesus residing in heaven is often conceived of as simply a "resuscitated Jesus:" Jesus as he was during his earthly ministry, simply brought back to life after his death on the cross. We forget the basic difference between resuscitation and biblical resurrection.

As I often remind you, a resurrected Jesus is, in Paul's words, a "new creation." That unique individual is no longer a first century CE free Jewish man. We know from Galatians 3 that the Apostle is convinced such a person is as much a slave as free, a Gentile as a Jew, and a woman as a man. I believe it's far more difficult to surface the risen Jesus in the people we encounter in our daily lives than it is to encounter Jesus' Spirit in the inspired thoughts which flash through our minds.

Though the Spirit certainly helps us know what to do in concrete situations, surfacing the risen Jesus in concrete individuals helps us build the body of Christ among us. I have no problem conceiving of Jesus being rewarded by the Father for dying for us, as long as that reward doesn't make him/her more distant from us.

Today's feast might be a reason why we should have included one or more inspired books in our collection of early Christian writings. Our sacred authors believed there'd always be "another way" of looking at our faith, a way different from their own. If that's true, after 2,000 years we have a perspective on the faith those first century writers simply didn't have.

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