

MAY 19TH, 2019: FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 14:21-27 Revelation 21:1-5a John 13:31-33a, 34-35

What do we do when the opposite of what we expect will happen actually happens? Are we so busy concentrating on what should have been that we don't even notice what actually took place?

Years ago I experienced some of "that" while visiting friends in Paris. One evening they took me to meet their pastor in Belleville (France that is.) During the introductions, the priest smiled, shook my hand and said something to me. I quickly turned to one of my friends and instinctively said, "Tell Father I'm glad to meet him, but please tell him I don't speak French." My friend hesitated for a few seconds, then quietly informed me, "He's speaking English to you!"

We heard about a similar happening in last week's readings when, beyond all expectations, most Jews who encountered the good news rejected the faith of Jesus while many Gentiles accepted it. Jesus' first followers originally presumed non-Jews would have little in common with this Jewish carpenter and the reform he preached. Yet by the time Luke composes his Acts of the Apostles in the mid-80s, Gentiles are making up the vast majority of the Christian community while the percentage of Jews in the church falls year after year.

A unique Christian pattern is being created. Followers of the risen Jesus are expected to constantly "hang loose." Those who are serious about accepting his/her faith can never be certain where he/she is going to take them next. The invitation could come from the most unexpected people, and lead down the most overlooked roads. Luke zeros in on this phenomenon in today's Acts pericope.

When Paul and Barnabas returned to the community in Antioch which had originally commissioned and sent them out to spread Jesus' faith, the church couldn't help but be amazed at the report they gave. Though they sent them to evangelize Jews, they actually converted Gentiles! And when they backtracked through these new communities the pair discovered they were so generously adapting their lives to Jesus' faith that they could begin appointing leaders among them. Christianity was much more than just a fad.

Slowly but surely, Jesus' followers are discovering their faith is creating what the author of Revelation often refers to as a "new heaven and a new earth." Right before their eyes, "the former heaven and the former earth had passed away."

Yet in the midst of all these changes, there's one constant in the faith of Jesus: love. Everything isn't up for grabs. John's Jesus couldn't be clearer in his Last Supper discourse. "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." It's this love which demands the frequent changes. The same act of love doesn't always show love to everyone at the same time. As Paul and Barnabas discovered, other Christs have to reflect not only on what should be, but what actually is.

I, for instance, was always taught to expect dire "things" to result from inviting non-Catholic Christians to participate in the Eucharist. These transubstantiation unbelievers would probably do something to disrespect the host – or worse. (I clearly remember horror stories of people taking the host out of their mouths and conducting "black masses!")

Yet in my personal experiences I've encountered nothing but good when the "rules" are broken and intercommunion happens. Not only are the recipients profoundly grateful to receive the Body of Christ, but it creates a oneness among the participants that can't be accomplished any other way. Eucharist is no longer a reward, but a help.

During those times, is the risen Jesus actually speaking English to us?

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MAY 26TH, 2019: SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 15:1-2, 27-29 Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23 John 14:23-29

One of the most important concepts in our Christian Scriptures revolves around the community's belief that the teachings of the risen Jesus continue to come to his/her followers through the years. They don't end either with Jesus' ascension or the end of the biblical period. John's Jesus clearly states that belief during his Last Supper discourse. "I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth." (16:12-13) In other words, his Spirit will keep the revelation coming.

Even in today's gospel pericope we hear Jesus assure us, "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit . . . will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you." The Spirit is always in our lives, constantly teaching the community what the risen Jesus wants us to learn about God's will. Though our sacred authors certainly presume revelation is an ongoing process, our church "officially" closed the canon of Scripture within a century of the historical Jesus. At least on that level, this church-mandated shut-down implies that our job in the faith today is just to review, no longer to discover.

But if we actually did listen to the Holy Spirit, and go beyond what the gospel Jesus taught his people, what form would that new teaching take? How does the Spirit communicate its ongoing revelation to the church? Does she regularly schedule listening sessions or setup ecumenical councils? Who conducts the meetings, takes the notes or verifies the Spirit's message? Where should the sessions be held? Perhaps it would be best for the Spirit just to go one on one with a special designate and cut out the middle people, sort of like the church does with papal infallibility. Yet if we listen carefully to today's Acts passage, those middle people are essential. Luke's convinced that's how the process is done. After the ascension in Acts, the risen Jesus works only through people; he/she no longer works directly in the life of the church.

Former St. Louis University historian Jack Padberg once remarked that there've been no significant changes in the church which haven't been preceded by years – if not generations – of disobedience. (Private reconciliation is a classic example; something for which we must credit that great "rule breaker" St. Patrick.) It seems the same holds true for the Holy Spirit's changes.

When Paul and Barnabas began baptizing Gentiles without first converting them to Judaism, they were at least skirting an early church law, if not actually breaking it. No wonder some Jewish Christians want to go back to the status quo, to the days when things are once again in black and white.

It's too bad that those who have chosen today's Acts reading have omitted 20 verses! Obviously there's lots of discussion – call it arguing – over this Gentile issue. Such a community-changing decision doesn't just come into people's mind fully cooked. It takes time before it develops. Though we long for the day when the community experiences a New Jerusalem, we'll experience lots of "hit and misses" before that event actually takes place.

John's Jesus presumes we must give ourselves over to a Spirit-filled, ongoing process. Those who expect immediate, facile answers aren't hearing our readings. As frustrating as Pope Francis can be at times, he seems determined to implement this process. Instead of just telling us what the Spirit wants, he's listening to what the Spirit is saying – not just to those in authority in the church, but also to the rule-breakers. He wasn't being flippant when he uttered those memorable words, "Who am I to judge?" He was simply being serious about the Spirit's ongoing role in the church.

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