

MAY 6, 2012: FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 9:26-31 I John 3:18-24 John 15:1-8

In Fr. Donald Cozzens' recent National Catholic Reporter review of Cullen Murphy's *God's Jury: The Inquisition and The Making of the Modern World*, the former seminary rector mentioned a passing supermarket encounter with an elderly man who looked in his direction and said, "Heretic!" When the well-known author eventually tracked down his accuser in the produce department and demanded to know why he had labeled him a heretic, he discovered, "He didn't like my questioning of mandatory celibacy for diocesan clergy." Hardly heretical material.

From today's second and third readings, it's clear it didn't take long before one Christian called another a heretic - long before supermarket produce departments even came into existence.

One need only page through Raymond Brown's classic *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* to surface the theological problems tearing apart the Johannine community. This particular church constantly had to deal with the question: How does one distinguish the truth from heresy?

Our Acts passage tells us this wasn't the first time followers of Jesus were confused over what to believe or to whom to listen. Fifty years before John wrote, Paul's initial post-conversion arrival in Jerusalem created parallel difficulties for many Christians. How do we know he's really a disciple of Jesus? Is his road-to-Damascus story just a trick to get us to come out of the closet and expose ourselves to persecution? Do we have to buy into his theology that Gentiles can become other Christs without first becoming Jews? Eventually the Jerusalem church reached the conclusion that Paul simply was too hot to handle. They shipped him off to Tarsus and the community finally achieved some peace.

Unfortunately, the Johannine community couldn't imitate their Jerusalem predecessors. They couldn't be unified by just ridding themselves of one person. Their only hope was to return to the essentials of their faith; precisely what the authors of I John and John's gospel encourage their readers to do.

The former couldn't have stated his thesis more clearly and precisely. ". . . We should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us." Those who continually try to imitate the risen Jesus' love for all people simply don't have enough time or space for heresy in their daily lives.

The author of John's gospel not only agrees, his Jesus provides us with a hard to forget metaphor. "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in them will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither"

In a sense, our evangelist is simply saying, "Actions speak louder than words." If you're a loving, life-giving force in your community, then you must be getting that life and love from your connection with Jesus, not from any particular theology.

John would certainly agree with many of the pointed observations contained in Andrew Sullivan's recent *Newsweek* article, *The Forgotten Jesus*. All institutions which claim to be Christian must constantly go back to Jesus. Though we might be embarrassed by what we find when we do so, it's the only way to be certain we're doing what Jesus wants us to do. Those familiar with the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures are also familiar with their constant command: "Return to Yahweh!" Our modern Christian prophets, following the example of Vatican II, are likewise commanding, "Return to Jesus!"

If we dare do so, we might be surprised to discover that some of those most quick to label others "heretic," might actually be the most heretical people around.

MAY 13, 2012: SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
 Acts 10:25-26,34-35,44-48 I John 4:7-10 John 15:9-17

There's no doubt about the theme of today's readings. "This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you." John's entire gospel revolves around that message. Though a simple command, it can create problems. Love often means different things for different people.

My marriage course students always knew what the first question would be on every exam: "What's the difference between love and like?" If they got it wrong, I threatened not to correct the rest of the exam. They couldn't possibly pass a marriage course if they didn't know that distinction.

As we old-timers know, like is an emotion of attraction toward something or someone. I can like auto racing, or someone's hair style. I can even like certain individuals. But just because I'm attracted to them doesn't mean I love them.

Love is the act of giving yourself to someone else. It can include emotions of attraction; but you can also give yourself to a person you don't like. (I presume the gospel Jesus did so during the four Passion Narratives.) Love doesn't come so much from the heart as from the mind. We don't decide to like, but we do choose to love.

It's this kind of love the author of I John has in mind when he tells his community, "Let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God." As I always mention when we have Scripture readings containing the word "know," for a Semite, to know someone or something means to experience that someone or something, not just to have an intellectual association with them. In today's pericope, that means our sacred author is convinced we experience God in the act of giving ourselves to others.

Yet, all Christian love is simply an imitation of Jesus' love of us. John's Jesus clearly reminds us of how unlimited that love is. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

It's no accident that the evangelist immediately follows this statement with Jesus' assurance, "I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father."

When one begins to love another, the relationship between the two changes. You can't regard someone as an inferior after you've given yourself to him or her. They now "know" you and you them. You've experienced one another in a different way in the giving of yourself.

That mutual experience seems to be one of the reasons the early church eventually reached out to people they originally thought could never be members of the Christian community.

We see this process happening in today's Acts passage. Up until this point, Samaritans (Jewish heretics) have been evangelized, even Gentile converts to Judaism (the Ethiopian eunuch) have been baptized. But Cornelius and his family are the first Gentiles to be admitted into the church as Gentiles. The reason behind this dramatic change in church practice is clear. "In truth," Peter proclaims, "I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears God and acts uprightly is acceptable to God." By loving others, we begin to relate to them as God relates to them.

Through the centuries, Jesus' command to love has resulted in Christians being in the forefront of the abolition of slavery and the civil rights movement. But it's evident there are still other groups out there who have yet to make it into our "friends" category. And we're dealing with just this one planet. Lord (literally) knows what demands love will make on us if and when we discover other life forms in outer space. Our faith descendants might look upon us as "having had it easy."