

MAY 27, 2012: PENTECOST

Acts 2:1-11 I Corinthians 12:3b-7,12-13 John 15:26-27,16:12-15

Luke seems to be the first author of the Christian Scriptures to presume both he and all who read his double volume work will die before Jesus' Second Coming. That means he's preparing his community for the long haul. Unlike his predecessors who thought they were training sprinters, Luke's coaching distance runners. Given that change in direction, there's a big question he must answer: "How do we know those who are committed to carrying on Jesus' ministry are actually doing what Jesus wants them to do?" He certainly didn't leave them any detailed instructions. Luke's answer is simple and to the point. "He left us his Spirit."

Throughout the Acts of the Apostles, the Spirit guides the early Christian community, even leading them down roads the historical Jesus had never traveled. That's why Luke spends so much time and space narrating the arrival of the Spirit just a few days after Jesus' ascension.

Pentecost was celebrated by Jews long before Jesus' birth. It was the feast which commemorated Yahweh entering into the Sinai covenant with the Chosen People. Yahweh promised to be their God and they committed themselves to being Yahweh's people. At that point the Jewish community formally came into existence.

Luke places the Spirit's arrival on this specific day because he believes it parallels what had happened 1,200 years before. This event formed Jesus' disciples into the church he intended them to be: the community which would carry on his work. All it's members were now "other Christs."

It's no accident that Luke accompanies the Spirit's arrival with wind, noise and fire; elements which cause quite a disturbance. He presumes whenever the Spirit comes, someone will be disturbed. In most cases, we'll be asked to do something we've never done before.

Writing about ten years after Luke, John takes for granted the Spirit will lead the church in new directions, even beyond those the historical Jesus had explored. Listen carefully to what John's Jesus tells his disciples during the Last Supper. "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." In other words, "You ain't seen nothing yet!"

I've often reflected on how fortunate young couples are on the day they take their marriage vows. At that point they don't know everything those vows will one day demand of them. John's Jesus is saying the same thing about the commitment his followers are making to carry on his work. Just as the couple's love for one another will help them stay committed as the future evolves, so the Holy Spirit will help Christians stay on the right path as they evolve in their following of Jesus.

Lest we think the Spirit comes only to one group of Christians in the church, Paul reminds his Corinthian community that everyone constantly receives that Spirit. "To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit." If each of us isn't open to the Spirit working in everyone, the common good of the community suffers. We're only the Body of the Risen Christ when we're attune to where the Spirit is leading that Body.

When the late Carroll Stuhmueller was once asked by a group of women religious how they would know when the Spirit was speaking to them, he replied, "I have two rules. First, the thought you surface at that moment can't come from a process of reasoning. It has to burst into your mind like an insight. Second, if you carry out what the thought demands, it'll cost you big time." The cost is almost always the element which stops us from carrying out the Spirit's wishes. We simply don't want to be that "disturbed."

JUNE 3, 2012: HOLY TRINITY

Deuteronomy 4:32-34,39-40 Romans 8:14-17 Matthew 28-16-20

Those who study Scripture are constantly discovering who God is. Since God is "other" than all of us, we humans can only talk about God in symbols and metaphors. To completely understand God and God's actions is practically and intellectually impossible.

Our Jewish ancestors in the faith were convinced they had at least an inkling about God's personality because Yahweh had worked in their lives throughout their history. The author of Deuteronomy reminds his readers of their uniqueness. "Was it ever heard of? Did a people ever hear the voice of God speaking from the midst of fire, as you did, and live? Or did any god venture to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation . . . ?" God tells us about God by being embedded in our existence. By reflecting on our history, we "... must now know and fix in our heart, that Yahweh is God in the heavens above and on earth below, and that there is no other." We can only find God in heaven by first surfacing God on earth.

That seems to be one of the reasons Paul insists we relate to God as God's children. The Apostle expects Jesus' followers to get rid of the "highfalutin" titles which keep God at a distance. For those who imitate the Son of God, God's simply "Abba:" Pop, or Daddy. "AH who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a Spirit of adoption ... heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ..."

There's only one problem with relating to God as children relate to their parents: the only child of God with whom we're familiar - Jesus of Nazareth - suffered because of his great love of others. Paul is convinced the only way we can be certain that we, as children, are relating correctly to God is by our suffering. It's in our pain that we most get a glimpse of God's personality. When we're the most helpless, God is the most present.

Along this same line, Matthew teaches that our God isn't a hit and miss element in our history: some days God's here, other days God's absent. In today's gospel pericope, Jesus - God with us - assures his disciples that if they're carrying on his ministry, "I am with you always, until the end of the age." Since there's no ascension in Matthew, we presume the risen Jesus is part of everything we do and are.

Most Christians are surprised to discover that the doctrine of the Trinity - something we expect to find on the first page of our catechisms - wasn't formulated until the Council of Nicea in 325 CE. It took almost 300 years of reflecting on God's presence in their lives before the church could formulate their belief in a Father, Son and Spirit in the symbolic expression of "three persons in one God." The council participants were obviously admitting that our knowledge of God is an ongoing experience.

Perhaps on this particular day we'd best show that we've heard the message our sacred authors are proclaiming by committing ourselves to be extremely reflective about the ways God enters our life. No one theologian, no one sacred author, no one church doctrine can provide us with a complete picture of God. That's why we have to be open not only to God working in our own lives, but to be anxious to discover how God works in the lives of others, even in the lives of those who don't profess faith in Jesus. Anyone who believes one religion has a monopoly on surfacing God's personality has never understood Scripture.

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