

MAY 19, 2013: PENTECOST

Acts 2:1-11 I Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13 John 20:19-23

I remember years ago asking my high school Scripture class what they thought about the Twelve after we'd studied Mark's entire gospel line by line. One girl raised her hand and replied, "I always thought they were important people. But they're really a bunch of dummies."

If one reads only Mark and Matthew's gospels, that response is correct. The first two evangelists frequently employ the Twelve as a literary device to push the narrative along. In Matthew, for instance, there's just one time when one of them either gives the right answer to a question, or makes a completely correct observation. (That's in Matthew 16 when Peter answers Jesus' question, "But who do you say I am?" forcing Jesus to point out, "You didn't come up with this on your own.") In some sense they play the role of the "straight man" in a modern comedy routine, always advancing the dialogue, making certain Jesus gets the key lines.

But by the time Luke writes, in the mid-80s, the church is facing a new situation. Unlike his two gospel predecessors, Luke presumes the Christian community is going to be around for a long time. Jesus' Parousia isn't going to happen anytime soon. People are beginning to ask, "How do you know this stuff you're telling us is true? Do you have reliable witnesses?"

In many ways, Luke rehabilitates the Twelve, making them the reliable witnesses his readers need. We Catholics, who claim our leaders are "successors of the apostles," have no problem with his treatment of the Twelve. Our catechisms have traditionally bought into Luke's theology on that topic. Yet, especially on this day, it's important to see that Luke's Twelve are witnesses to more than just the things the historical Jesus said and did; they also witness to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the community.

One of their tasks, as we hear in today's I Corinthians pericope, is to testify to the presence of that Spirit in everyone who follows the risen Jesus. Paul, the apostle, couldn't be more emphatic about his belief that every Christian is Spirit-gifted. "To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit." Paul's convinced that only when all Christians use their gifts for the common good does their community morph into the body of the risen Christ

Of course, Luke tells us in our first reading that the Spirit's arrival in the community isn't always a peaceful event. He deliberately chooses the violent images of wind, noise and fire to accompany his/her coming. The early church presumed one reason it was gifted with the Spirit was because it daily had to face environments, situations, and questions which the historical Jesus hadn't encountered. These other Christs had to go beyond, "What would Jesus do?" They were forced to ask, "What's the risen Jesus doing?" The Spirit was the one element providing the answer. And almost always, that answer led to disturbing insights.

On the other hand, as we read in John's Easter Sunday narrative, that Spirit is also the force of forgiveness in the church. Without constant forgiveness, no family or institution can long exist. If the Spirit is the glue holding the Christian community together, we shouldn't be surprised that John's Jesus proclaims, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them . . ." (Scholars presume Jesus never wants us to withhold forgiveness. He simply wants us to be aware of the destructive power we have over others by not forgiving them.)

Perhaps the most important thing to which we church leaders should be testifying today is the power of the Spirit in our midst - a power not even we can control.

Roger Vermalen Karban

This commentary is provided by the FAITHFUL OF SOUTHERN ILLINOIS. Please share it with a friend. We appreciate your comments and donations.

F.O.S.I.L., BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222

MAY 26, 2013: HOLY TRINITY
Proverbs 8:22-31 Romans 5:1-5 John 16:12-15

It's always difficult to comment on readings for a feast which our sacred authors knew nothing or very little about. The technical definition of the Trinity - three persons in one God - was formulated at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, more than 200 years after our last scriptural writing took shape. Though our Christian biblical writers speak about a Father, Son and Holy Spirit, they don't join them together into a formal Trinity. Just as one can define a real connoisseur of classical music as an individual who hears the William Tell Overture and doesn't think of the Lone Ranger, so a real connoisseur of Scripture is someone who hears a biblical writing that speaks of a Father, Son and Holy Spirit and doesn't think of Nicaea's Trinity definition.

But what should someone be thinking?

Certainly we should appreciate the "otherworldly" experiences with which Jesus' earliest followers had to deal. By coming into contact with this Galilean carpenter, they also came into contact with someone who went far beyond the words and concepts they had traditionally employed to describe their God.

We know from John's theology that Jesus' disciples eventually reached the conclusion that Jesus and God were one and the same. But they also realized that this insight only came long after the historical Jesus' death and resurrection. That meant that only Jesus' Spirit - a special gift they all received after his death and resurrection - could have led them to understand that oneness.

This seems to be why, during his Last Supper discourse, John's Jesus states, "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." Our Christian sacred authors were convinced revelation didn't end with the demise of the historical Jesus. It's an ongoing process, instigated and guided by Jesus' Spirit.

Some of Jesus' earliest followers compared Jesus' Spirit to Yahweh's spirit in the Hebrew Scriptures, especially zeroing in on the "wisdom" which Yahweh's spirit embeds in all creation. Unlike our modern ideas of wisdom, scriptural wisdom springs from the ability to surface and appreciate God working in everything God created. Along with other wisdom authors, the writer of today's Proverbs passage believes we're able to learn about Yahweh by carefully observing patterns in nature - patterns which help us uncover and understand God's actions and personality. Of course, other biblical writers, especially the author of Job, contend we really can't discover who God is by following that process, forcing scholars to talk about the biblical "wisdom debate."

As a proponent of the "pro" side of that controversy, our Proverbs author poetically describes the wisdom aspect of God's spirit, actually personifying that dimension, a trait he or she believes was present from the "beginning of God's ways."

Though Paul, in our Romans pericope, doesn't seem to get involved in the wisdom debate, he's convinced that Jesus' Spirit leads us to recognize and appreciate the "love of God (which) has been poured out into our hearts." His Spirit helps us look at everything in our lives in a different way than other people view those events. The Apostle goes so far as to "boast in (his) afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint...." The Spirit changes everything - or at least the way we look at everything, even the way we look at God.

Thankfully the historical Jesus doesn't seem to have been concerned with definitions of God. He was simply committed to showing us how to experience God, the very thing his followers eventually experienced in him.

Roger Vermalen Karban

This commentary is provided by the FAITHFUL OF SOUTHERN ILLINOIS. Please share it with a friend. We appreciate your comments and donations. FOSIL, BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222