

MAY 11, 2014: FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 2:14a, 36-41 I Peter 2:20b-25 John 10:1-10

Those who employ metaphors to convey their ideas normally only zero in on one part of the comparison, ignoring other parts that don't fit the idea they're trying to get across. For instance, when we call someone "honey," we're usually referring only to the sweetness of that substance, ignoring the fact that bees produce honey through a process of regurgitation. Or when the Song of Songs author compares his lover's nose to "the tower of Lebanon that looks toward Damascus," he's not referring to the size of that tower.

In the same way, the shepherding metaphors employed in today's second and third readings zero in on the care shepherds and gate keepers have for their flocks, not on the stupidity of sheep.

In a highly institutionalized church, which Catholicism has become, it's at times hard for us to cut through the minutiae of the structure and return to the basic relationship with the risen Jesus which was at the heart of early Christian faith, a faith which was there long before the development of the institution.

Already by the end of the first century, some in John's community were breaking their concentration on Jesus and his care of them. They were starting to integrate elements into their beliefs which had nothing to do with imitating Jesus' dying and rising. They had forgotten, in the words of Peter in our Acts pericope, that they had been "baptized ... in the name of Jesus the Christ for the forgiveness of... sins." Once Christians lose sight of their being other Christs, strange things begin to happen.

That's why John insists on a return to Christian basics. Like an enclosure provides security for sheep, so our relationship with the risen Jesus provides security for us. He's the only gate we'll ever need. "I am the gate," John's Jesus insists. "Whoever enters through me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. A thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy; I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly."

In some sense, when the Pentecost crowd asks Peter, "What are we to do ... ?" they're implicitly asking what they have to do to have a more abundant life right here and now. They're not necessarily inquiring about what they have to do to get into heaven.

As a child I was guaranteed entrance into heaven by just following the commands of the institution. Couldn't argue with that. Yet, though I hate to admit it, I often envied some of my Protestant friends who, even if they might not be doing what was necessary to get into heaven, were having a lot more fun than I was. They certainly were living life more abundantly. Sometimes, in contrast, I felt like I was just a dumb sheep forced to do what the smarter shepherds insisted I do for my own good. In those days, the only other Christs in my life were those shepherds.

We had forgotten what the unknown author of I Peter took for granted, that all Christians are expected to "follow in his (Jesus') footsteps." What he did, we now do. Yet the writer realistically presumes that straying from a relationship with Jesus is an occupational hazard for followers of Jesus. That's why he reminds his readers, "You had gone astray like sheep, but you have now returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls."

That's why we, like our sacred author, always must return to the essentials. They alone guaranteed we'll live fulfilled, abundant lives long before we step into eternity.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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MAY 18, 2014: FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 6:1-7 I Peter 2:4-9 John 14:1-12

You've probably seen one of my favorite posters. It's the old Glenmary picture of a young African-American boy standing in front of a ramshackle house wearing Salvation Army rejected clothes. The inscription at the bottom of the poster simply states, "God made me; God don't make junk!"

Today's three sacred authors are conveying the same message.

The unknown author of I Peter couldn't be clearer. He reminds his readers, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." Jesus' followers certainly aren't junk.

John's Jesus takes this privileged status one step further. During his long Last Supper discourse, he assures his followers, "Whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater ones than these, because I am going to the Father." We're actually going to accomplish more than the historical Jesus accomplished! Can't get much more important than that.

In today's Acts passage, Luke demonstrates how Jesus' first followers put their importance into action. In a writing in which Christians usually get along quite well together, Luke uncharacteristically introduces a conflict between Greek speaking widows and Aramaic speaking widows revolving around the daily distribution of food. Because the former don't understand the language of the food's distributors, they suspect they're being shortchanged.

The solution which the Twelve come up with is unique. Instead of solving the problem themselves, they appoint seven men to take care of the Hellenist widows' concerns. Part of the uniqueness is that every one of the chosen seven is Greek! Each has a Greek name.

Though the church later employed this pericope as the biblical proof for the institution of the diaconate, Luke doesn't seem to have had that purpose in mind. He's more concerned with demonstrating the importance of being other Christs than in setting up institutional ministries.

Once the Christian community began to develop its hierarchical structures in the late second century, it also began to forget the dignity of each individual Christian. Thankfully the bishops at Vatican II obliterated the pyramid image of the church I learned in my grade school religion classes. But the biblically oriented horizontal image with which they replaced it has yet to fully catch on in practice. Many of us still feel more comfortable with the vertical image of our youth. It didn't give us a lot of importance; but it also didn't give us a lot of responsibility. We simply had to unquestionably do what we were told.

Yet two recent happenings have helped restore some of our biblical dignity.

First, Pope Francis actually tried to surface what ordinary Catholics think about family issues, long before a synod of bishops discusses those issues. Though the process he employed to surface our opinions left a lot to be desired, yet an attempt was actually made to do so. That hasn't happened for centuries.

Second, when my former bishop Wilton Gregory was challenged over his recent living arrangements, he characteristically left the final decision on that topic to committees representing all levels of the faithful of his archdiocese. And he abided by their decision.

We've obviously got a long way to go before we return to the concept early Christians had of themselves. But we're at least making some small attempts. Perhaps our main task now is simply to reinforce our own self-images with the beliefs of our ancestors in the faith. If we don't regard ourselves as being important, it's easy to see why others might think we're junk.

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