

**MAY 10, 2015: SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**  
Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48    I John 4:7-10    John 15:9-17

Today's Acts passage narrates the biblical beginning of one of the three basic changes made in Christianity's first century and a half: the acceptance of Gentiles into the church as Gentiles.

Originally non-Jews who wished to become disciples of the risen Jesus were expected to first convert to Judaism, and only then convert to Christianity. Since the historical Jesus was a reformer of Judaism, why would a non-Jew want to follow him? Because he had preached his reform in the context of the religion he professed – Judaism - his earliest disciples logically presumed they had to imitate his reforming faith against that same background.

Yet, eventually some of those disciples began to understand more implications of Jesus' resurrection than they had first recognized. As Paul tells his readers in Galatians 3, the risen Jesus was quite different from the historical Jesus. Whereas the latter was a Jew, the former had become both Jew and Gentile. Neither was this "new creation" restricted to being a slave or a free person; not even to being a man or woman. For "progressive" Christians like Paul, that meant more than just free, Jewish men could become other Christs.

Though this theology was widely accepted by the time Luke composes Acts in the mid-80s, he paints a picture of a gradual process which leads up to it. First, "heretical Jews" – Samaritans – are permitted to become Jesus' followers. Next, Philip baptizes a Gentile convert to Judaism – the Ethiopian eunuch. Finally, in today's first reading, Cornelius, simply a "God fearing" Gentile, and his family are evangelized and baptized by Peter.

Of course, once Gentiles as Gentiles are accepted as full partners in the faith, most of Jesus' followers begin to ignore the 613 laws of Moses to which first century Jews were committed. Though Matthew's Jesus – addressing the evangelist's Jewish/Christian community - insists his disciples still keep each of those 613 precepts, our Christian biblical authors normally revolve their morality around love. It's not only the one act that unites Jewish and Gentile Christians, it's the one principle on which the historical Jesus based his reform. Love of others is at the heart of Jesus' faith.

No one expresses this principle better than John's Jesus. "This is my commandment:" he proclaims, "Love one another as I love you." And should anyone have any doubt about what such love entails, he continues, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

The author of I John insightfully expands Jesus' command. "Beloved," he writes, "let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love." The writer is convinced all this love stuff actually began with God. "In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins."

Though Luke's Peter is motivated to baptize Cornelius both because of a vision from God and the Spirit's gifts which come down upon the centurion and his family, most commentators on the subject believe love might have historically played a bigger role in Gentile conversions than is mentioned in the Acts narrative.

As I've mentioned before, one of my favorite "religious" posters is the Glenmary one depicting an African-American young boy wearing tattered, hand-me-down clothes, standing in front of a ramshackle house. The caption reads: "God made me. God don't make junk."

If we regard someone as incapable of becoming another Christ, I'm afraid we're regarding him/her as junk. Our sacred authors were convinced God never created any junk. It just takes some of his/her creatures a little while to figure that out.

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## MAY 14 or 17, 2015: ASCENSION

Acts 1:1-11    Ephesians 1:17-23    Mark 16:15-20

It's important to understand that today's gospel pericope originally wasn't part of Mark's gospel. 16:9-20 isn't found in any of the earliest and best Marcan manuscripts, and none of the earliest church "Fathers" seemed to know of its existence. Even the bishops at the Council of Trent in 1545 agreed it was an addition to the gospel. Most scholars today believe it was written about 100 years after the original gospel, a century or so before Christians began to regard gospels as divinely inspired Scripture – at a time when it wasn't regarded as "sinful" to tamper with what later would be called sacred writings. The question is why was it written, and why was it eventually attached to Mark's gospel?

Many Marcan experts contend its composition had something to do with the way Mark's gospel originally ended. In 16:8, after the angel tells the women at the tomb, "Go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him,'" the evangelist mentions, "They went out and fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewilderment. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Having read the three other gospel empty tomb pericopes we're logically expecting some post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. Though Mark's angel promises an encounter with the risen Jesus in Galilee, he abruptly ends his gospel without narrating it. The readers of this first gospel are left to wonder where the risen Jesus is. He/she's simply "out there somewhere." No telling where you'll run into him/her.

The person responsible for this addition seemingly wanted to put order into something that originally wasn't very ordered: Jesus' post-resurrection activity. How long did he stick around? To whom did he appear? Where did he appear? Did he eventually ascend into heaven, like Luke says, or is he still in our midst, like Mark, Matthew and John contend? Today's unknown writer tried to pull all these diverse (and often contradictory) elements together, squeezing them into an orderly pattern and attaching them to a gospel that originally narrated no such activity. He/she felt obligated to "fill in the blanks."

Yet, the disorder in the gospel and I Corinthians 15 accounts of how people experienced the risen Jesus seems to have mirrored the fact that there was no one way to appreciate and understand the activity of this "new creation" in the lives of those who believed in him/her.

Luke, the author of Acts, appears to have believed that the risen Jesus' presence for 40 days after Easter was proof that the apostles' teaching was authentically rooted in his/her teaching. That's why, in some sense, Jesus' physical presence wasn't needed anymore. Though Luke's Christ eventually ascended into heaven, his/her disciples – other Christs – could now legitimately carry on his work. They were "graduates" of that unique 40 day course in Christianity.

Of course, other Christian sacred authors had different experiences. The Pauline disciple responsible for the letter to the Ephesians speaks about the risen Jesus as being "seated at (God's) right hand in the heavens, far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion." He/she's a majestic being. All things are "beneath his feet . . . and he's the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way." The writer is obviously overcome with the power of the risen Jesus, not necessary with his/her immanence.

In some sense, followers of Jesus are expected to "pay their money, and take their pick." Our personal relationships with that new creation create the norms we follow. Though it's important to reflect on other people's experiences, none of them were ever meant to trump our own.

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