

MAY 17, 2015: SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 1:15-17, 20a, 20c-26 I John 4:11-16 John 17:11b-19

How do we know we're continuing the reform movement begun by Jesus of Nazareth as he intended it to continue?

We're not the first Christians to ask that question. Our sacred authors frequently dealt with that issue on different levels and in different ways.

For instance, Luke, the author of Acts, sees the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost as the outward sign Jesus' immediate followers are correctly carrying on his ministry: emphasizing his priorities, and helping people change their value systems as he demanded. But, as we hear in today's first reading, Luke also sees the importance of keeping the Twelve intact until the Spirit's arrival. It's that symbolic group who first experienced Jesus' reform, and who were committed to keeping it alive. Just as the twelve sons of Jacob comprised the heart of the Chosen People, so these twelve disciples experienced the heart of Jesus' faith. Until the arrival of the Spirit, they were essential. That's why Luke makes a big thing of replacing Judas.

Peter insists that the person chosen for this role "accompanied us the whole time the Lord Jesus came and went among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day on which he was taken up from us" (Though some women could have fulfilled this job description, Luke is trying to maintain the symbolism of Israel's twelve tribes: twelve sons of Jacob. That's why it must be a man.) Of course, if any of the Twelve die after Pentecost, they're not replaced. Once the Spirit comes, we're operating under new rules.

The author of I John brings up one of those new regulations: love. His argument is crystal clear. "If God so loved us, we also must love one another. . . . If we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us." No one has better summarized the faith situation in which we find ourselves: "God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in them." Our love of others guarantees continuity with the historical Jesus and his ministry. As long as we're giving ourselves to others, we're doing what Jesus wants us to do.

The fourth evangelist goes one step further. During his well-known last supper discourse he zeros in on Jesus' passion to be one with his followers. "Holy Father," John's Jesus prays, "keep them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one just as we are one." By continuing to preach and live the word Jesus gave them, his disciples are keeping the risen Jesus alive in the world in which they live. "I gave them your word," Jesus proclaims, "and the world hated them, because they do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world."

John's convinced that we're correctly carrying on Jesus' ministry simply because he planned it that way. For the time being, we're his substitutes. "I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one." Though we have a tough row to hoe, it's the row Jesus wants us to hoe.

Of course, each of today's three sacred authors presume we've already had experiences of the risen Jesus alive and working in our midst. That's the first "good news" all of them proclaim in their writings. We're not expected to carry on the ministry of a person who died 2,000 years ago. We're actually carrying on the ministry of someone we've already encountered – and continue to encounter – in our daily lives.

No wonder we want to make certain we're doing it the right way.

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MAY 24, 2015: PENTECOST
Acts 2:1-11 I Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13 John 20:19-23

During the church's 2,000 year history, the Holy Spirit has often been an aggravation to the leaders of the institution. "Things" would obviously run more smoothly without that "thorn in their side." In some sense, the second century movement to form a hierarchical church structure, as we know it, was an attempt to get rid of that aggravation.

One of the difficulties of falling back on the Holy Spirit for guidance is that we're forced to deal with prophets. Surfacing and listening to prophets was the normal process biblical people employed to understand what God wanted them to do. Throughout the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, there runs a belief that God always places a handful of especially inspired people in our midst to point us in the direction God wishes us to go. The late Bruce Vawter labeled these individuals "the conscience of the people." The great Hans Walter Wolff referred to them as "people who supply us with the future implications of our present actions."

The only problem facing God's biblical disciples revolved around finding ways to separate false prophets from real prophets. Both claimed to have been sent by God. Though as a Scripture teacher, Wolff faithfully outlined the five classic rules for distinguishing between real and fake, as one of the world's experts on biblical prophecy, he always added a sixth criterion. "Authentic prophets," he taught, "constantly cause confusion." This is especially true when the prophets' words are triggered by the Holy Spirit.

Luke warns of that disturbing situation in the way he describes the Jerusalem Pentecost event. It's no accident that the Spirit's arrival is accompanied with noise, wind and fire: all elements which take us out of our peaceful, secure environment and throw us into confusion. Yet it's only after such a disturbing experience that "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim." Had they not first gone through that confusion, no one would have "heard them speaking in his or her own tongue." Such aggravation seems to be a necessary when we're dealing with the Spirit.

Yet it's clear from today's I Corinthians pericope that even after the church receives the gift of tongues there's still a lot of confusion. How does a community handle a situation in which some are gifted with tongues and others aren't? Paul deals with this problem in chapters 12-14, outlining how a follower of Jesus and a recipient of the Spirit's gifts works through such confusion in order to employ his or her gifts "for some benefit." The Apostle's convinced that if we let love guide us through the aggravation of everyone having different – even at times conflicting - gifts we'll eventually discover we've morphed into the Body of Christ, each member working for the good of the whole body.

Of course, nothing brings more confusion than when we employ the Spirit's gift of forgiveness: the gift John's Jesus shares with his disciples on Easter Sunday night. We normally appreciate the security of knowing who our friends and who our enemies are. Yet, if we, like Jesus, actually forgive everyone's sins we obliterate that secure dividing line. It's impossible to live in a black and white world when forgiveness is the outward sign we're being "sent" as the Father has sent Jesus. Carrying on Jesus' ministry opens the door to lots of confusion. It simply seems to go with the territory.

Knowing these biblical "realities," I've been amused at some of the recent criticism Pope Francis has received from several high-profile church officials and commentators. Among other things, they actually accuse him of "causing confusion among the faithful."

How biblical can you get?

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