

MAY 31, 2015: TRINITY SUNDAY  
Deuteronomy 4:32-34, 39-40 Romans 8:14-17 Matthew 28:16-20

Followers of God are constantly discovering who God is.

Those who profess a biblical faith are convinced that knowing God isn't a matter of just memorizing catechism questions and answers, but of experiencing God on different levels and at different times in our lives. That's not only what our sacred authors did, they presumed their readers were committed to the same quest. We should especially keep this quest in mind today when we celebrate the feast of the Trinity.

Contrary to common expectations, today's three Scripture passages don't zero in precisely on a belief that there are three persons in one God. That specific insight into God's personality didn't take its well-known form until Constantine's Council of Nicea in 325 CE, almost three hundred years after Jesus' death and resurrection, and about two hundred years after the last book of Scripture was composed.

But these particular readings help us with some significant insights along the road to Nicea's declaration.

Deuteronomy's author, for instance, presumes his Jewish ancestors have heard the "voice of Yahweh," speaking to them not only "from the midst of fire," but also through the "statutes and commandments" which Yahweh lovingly gave them during their early centuries together. They were convinced that when they followed those specific regulations they were imitating the personality of the God they worshiped. Their behavior toward others mirrored Yahweh's behavior toward them.

More than any other divine encounter, their Exodus from Egypt convinced them Yahweh was a God who freed people, not enslaved them. And it was as a free people that they continually surfaced God in their midst.

The earliest followers of Jesus of Nazareth experience a parallel freedom. Paul reminds the Christian community in Rome that the Spirit of God which that first century CE itinerant preacher shared with his disciples - and now was giving to them - wasn't someone who brought fear to their lives. "You did not receive a spirit of slavery," he writes, "to fall back into fear but you received a Spirit of adoption, through whom we cry, 'Abba, Father.'" In other words, by imitating Jesus' dying and rising, we more clearly understand and experience God as a loving parent, not as a punishing judge. Some of our "old" definitions of God simply don't fit God's actual personality.

It's also clear from the ending of Matthew's gospel - which comprises today's third reading - that Jesus' followers were anxious to share their new experiences of God with others, especially when it came to the formula they employed in baptisms. Though Paul, writing mostly in the 50s, speaks only about baptizing "in the name of Jesus," Matthew's Jesus expands that ritual. By the mid-70s, Christians are obviously baptizing others "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." As time - and faith - goes on, God's Christian followers are experiencing him/her not just in the risen Jesus, but also in the Spirit which that "new creation" shares with them. God simply can't be tied down to just one definition, one thought, or one encounter.

Of course, if that's true about God, what about us? Paul reminded the Roman church that "those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God." I presume children share in their parents' personalities. If today's feast revolves around constantly discovering God, then it also has something to say about constantly discovering ourselves. The ancient Greek philosophers - and many medieval theologians - once thought they had us figured out. Yet today's people of faith believe there's still a lot left to learn. We've probably only scratched the surface of race, gender and sexual orientation. There are a lot of experiences out there that followers of God have yet to reflect on.

JUNE 7, 2015: BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST  
Exodus 24:3-8    Hebrews 9:11-15    Mark 14:12-16, 22-26

Few of my weekly commentaries create more problems and give birth to more negative comments than when I zero in on the biblical theology of the Lord's Supper.

Many of us forget that the Christian biblical authors who commented on that pivotal event didn't have access to the decrees of our ecumenical councils, nor did they read our modern catechisms. As a group, they interpreted the Lord's last supper quite differently from later theologians. They didn't even agree on what kind of a meal Jesus shared with his friends on the night before he died. As we hear in today's gospel pericope, Mark – along with Matthew and Luke who copied his narrative – tell us it was a Passover meal. John not only believes it was eaten the evening before Passover, he actually has Jesus “institute the Eucharist” not during this last meal, but earlier, during his chapter 6 bread miracle. Paul, in his well-known I Corinthians 11 passage, says nothing about Passover – one way or the other.

One reason for such diversity revolves around how these unique authors conceived of their ministry. They weren't modern historians, committed to giving us a blow by blow account of what actually happened. They were editorial writers, concerned not so much with what happened as with the meaning of what happened. And because they were Semitic, not Greek thinkers they were anxious to come up with both/and conclusions, not either/or statements. Like Fiddler on the Roof's Tevye, they were constantly trying to examine “the other hand.”

It's clear that our earliest biblical editorialists zeroed in on the community meal aspect of the Lord's Supper. It was during the “table fellowship” of Jesus' followers that they both kept him alive by remembering him and recognizing his presence among them as the risen “new creation.” He actually became the food and drink they shared and consumed.

It was their belief that they were carrying on his ministry that made both Paul and Mark quote Jesus' words over the cup in a different way than many of us remember them. Instead of saying, “This is my blood,” Jesus proclaims, “This is the blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many.”

The phrase – the blood of the covenant – refers back to today's Exodus passage. Moses commands that the blood of the animals sacrificed in the Sinai covenant ceremony be sprinkled on the people as a sign they were committed to carrying out the provisions of the agreement they'd just entered into with Yahweh. In a parallel way, Jesus expects us to drink from his cup as an outward sign that we're going to carry out the provisions of the covenant he's made with Yahweh; that we're going to carry on his ministry.

In this earliest Eucharistic theology, by becoming one with those who share this special meal, we're also becoming one with the risen Jesus in our midst, so one that we actually morph into other Christs.

The anonymous author of the letter to the Hebrews introduces a new way of looking at the Eucharist. Comparing Jesus to Jewish priests, he brings up the idea that, like those priests, Jesus offers sacrifice for our sins, leading to our eventual redemption. But, unlike the priests who offered animals, grain and wine, Jesus offers himself.

It's obvious that we've not only bought into this later theology, but that's the editorial we emphasized and developed in our councils and catechisms.

Though the bishops of Vatican II tried to bring us back to the community meal concept of the Eucharist, we're constantly in danger of reverting to sacrifice theology. It simply doesn't cost as much to attend as to participate. It's easier to just watch than to become one.