

APRIL 24TH, 2016: FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 14:21-27 Revelation 21:1-5a John 13:31-33a, 34-35

Many of us have yet to recognize the importance of communities in the early church. Individuals certainly stand out. But the communities which helped form and sustain those individuals frequently fade into the background. That's why today's first reading is so significant. There's no way the community which gave birth to Paul and Barnabas' missionary journeys can ever be overlooked. Wherever they went, they always introduced themselves as representatives of the church at Antioch. That community sent them out and paid their bills. And it was to that community that they eventually returned.

The news they brought seems to have pleased everyone. Through their evangelization "God . . . had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles." We know from chapter 11 that the Antioch community was one of the first Christian churches to take the ultra-liberal step of baptizing non-Jews, prompting Barnabas to travel to Tarsus and encourage the newly-converted Saul to return with him to Antioch. As a "Hellenist" Jew, Saul had grown up in a non-Jewish culture, spoke Greek and knew how to relate to Gentiles. He was perfect for carrying on a Gentile ministry.

Of course, as we'll see later in Acts, not every Christian community agreed with Antioch's practice of baptizing Gentiles without first converting them to Judaism. Paul would have to fight that battle literally until the day he died.

The early church certainly had more variety community to community than we have today. Though each dedicated itself to carrying out Jesus' gospel command to "have love for one another," each developed and showed that love in different ways.

When couples ask me to suggest a first reading for their wedding ceremony, I always suggest Proverbs 30:18-19. During my high school marriage courses, I've always taught, "There's no one way always, everywhere, and to everyone, to show love." That belief is mirrored in the Proverbs passage: "Three things are too wonderful for me, yes, four I cannot understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent over a rock, the way of a ship at high sea, and the way of a man with a woman."

The Hebrew word – "derek" – which here is translated "way," basically refers to a path or road. The Proverbs author is reminding his readers that there are no roads in the sky, over rocks, or at sea. Eagles, snakes and ships have to create their own roads to get from point A to point B. The zinger is that, in the same way, there are no roads in relationships between men and women. Each couple must create its own path. Love demands they do so.

That why no two Christian communities are exactly alike. Because each exists in order to show love to one another, each will do that in a different way. That's also why we have four gospels. Since each gospel springs from a different community, it's impossible to have just one. Notice how the author of Revelation speaks so often about "a new heaven and a new earth." If God is really dwelling among us and helping us show love to those around us, we'll always be new.

But in this day and age, when almost every diocese is closing and/or combining parishes, we have a problem. Church by church, we're getting rid of each parish's unique theology, the special way in which its members have loved one another.

As disturbing as this process is, it might be one way the risen Jesus is forcing us to reflect on how our own parish demonstrates its one of a kind love . . . before it's too late.

MAY 1ST, 2016: SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 15:1-2, 22-29 Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23 John 14:23-29

How do we know what the Holy Spirit wants us to do, and why is it important that we know?

The answer to the last question is given in today's gospel pericope. It's clear from our Christian Scriptures that the historical Jesus was deeply concerned his ministry be carried on after his death and resurrection. The earliest account of the Lord's Supper in I Corinthians 11 leaves no doubt about the issue, especially when it comes to sharing Jesus' cup. But Jesus' ministry only comes alive when it's lived and carried out in the real world. It's not just an abstract ideal somewhere up in the sky. If it's not embedded in our everyday lives, it's not Jesus' ministry.

That's the problem: how do we know what Jesus practically wants us to do in our everyday lives? He certainly didn't give his followers a step by step journal outlining what he expected. He simply gave them the Holy Spirit, his own Spirit which would not only "remind" us of the things he told his original disciples, but would also "teach" us. From what Jesus says two chapters later, the teaching entails things the historical Jesus never got around to sharing with his followers. "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." If carrying on the risen Jesus' ministry consisted only in repeating what the historical Jesus said and did, we wouldn't need the Holy Spirit.

According to Luke in today's Acts passage, the early Christian community discovered this very quickly. As we heard last weekend, the church in Antioch began to convert Gentiles to the faith without first converting them to Judaism. Though they were at peace in doing this, "some who had come down from Judea were instructing the brothers and sisters, 'Unless you are circumcised according to Mosaic practice, you cannot be saved.'" It seems the Holy Spirit was telling Christians in Jerusalem something different from what he/she was telling Christians in Antioch. What's a Christian to do? The historical Jesus never dealt with that issue.

A huge part of chapter 15 has been omitted from our liturgical selection, but the essentials are still there: the concerned parties call a meeting of the "whole church." No one person makes such an important decision.

The group's final statement, eventually sent to Antioch, begins, "It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us . . ." This isn't the first time in Acts that the Holy Spirit is equated with the Christian community. In chapter 5's Ananias and Sapphira pericope – a passage which, for obvious reasons, is never proclaimed during a Eucharist – we find the same belief. "Why," Peter demands to know, "did Ananias lie to the Holy Spirit?" Obviously the condemned man lied only to the Jerusalem Christian community. Yet Luke equates that group of people with the Holy Spirit.

Our Christian sacred authors not only put their bets on the Holy Spirit to keep us in touch with the things Jesus wishes to us do, they also presume the best place to surface that Spirit is to surface what the Body of Christ is thinking. If we, along with the author of Revelation, really believe the "Lord God almighty" is present among us, we must also admit all of us are more than just passive individuals in a huge church.

No wonder Pope Francis, as an essential part of his reforms, constantly insists the institutional church set up structures whereby the hierarchy can consult with everyone in the community. Nice to have a pope who knows his Acts of the Apostles.

COPYRIGHT 2016 – ROGER VERMALEN KARBAN