

MAY 15th, 2016: PENTECOST
Acts 2:1-11 I Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13 John 20:19-23

Afraid the axiom “If you don’t use it you’ll lose it” even applies to the Holy Spirit. It’s clear from our Christian Scriptures that Jesus of Nazareth didn’t share his Spirit with us just so we could lock him/her away in our dogmas and conveniently forget about his/her presence in our daily lives. The historical Jesus was convinced those of his followers who were seriously committed to carrying on his ministry would need his Spirit to guarantee they’d be carrying it out as he wanted it to be carried out.

This is certainly presumed in today’s three readings.

In our earliest passage – from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians – the Apostle conveys his belief that the Christian community can’t exist as Jesus planned it to exist without the Spirit. The Body of Christ can only function as a body when all its members correctly employ the gifts which the Spirit has showered upon them. More than anything, that Spirit develops and presumes the uniqueness of each person, “To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit.” In other words, if each Christian isn’t given the freedom to develop his or her gifts, the common good of the Christian community will suffer.

As Luke reminds us in today’s Acts passage, the Spirit’s presence notoriously creates confusion and tension. It’s no accident he employs fire, wind and noise to accompany the Spirit’s Pentecost arrival. If we want peace, quiet, and equilibrium in our Christian communities, we don’t want the Spirit in those communities. The Jerusalem crowd initially presumes those who’ve received the Spirit have simply been drinking too much. They’re not acting like “normal” people act.

Scholars who deal in “quantum theology” have an interesting take on the confusion the Spirit brings. Going beyond just this planet to discover God’s presence and activity in the entire universe, quantum theologians constantly remind us that change and evolution only take place in the universe when there are huge upheavals. If everything proceeds along peaceably, there simply is no change or evolution. (It’s no accident that we refer to the beginning of creation as the “big bang.”) In many ways, the Holy Spirit is the big bang of the Christian community. Without his/her presence and activity we’d never be doing what the risen Jesus expects us to do. We can’t biblically expect to be a spirit-led church without wind, fire and noise constantly being a part of whatever we accomplish. That’s how the universe works, and it’s how the Spirit works.

This brings us to today’s gospel passage. John, contradicting Luke, has the Holy Spirit come on the community not on the Jewish feast of Pentecost but on the Christian feast of Easter. According to his theology, Jesus rises from the dead, ascends into heaven (returns), and sends the Holy Spirit all on the same busy day. Also, unlike Luke, he connects the Holy Spirit in the life of the community with forgiveness of others. He faithfully agrees with other authors of the Christian Scriptures that the Spirit is the essential force helping us carry on Jesus’ ministry, but his hooking up the Spirit with forgiveness is unique. In John’s mind, the Spirit is the force who helps us discover how to forgive those who have hurt us.

Quantum theologians probably smile at John’s insight. Nothing causes more turmoil in the Christian community than forgiveness. It completely destroys the equilibrium of revenge. We usually know what to expect when someone retaliates for injuries. As Pope Francis often reminds us, forgiveness sends us into uncharted waters. Only the risen Jesus’ Spirit can guide us through the uncertainties such unexpected actions bring.

MAY 22ND, 2016: HOLY TRINITY
Proverbs 8:22-31 Romans 5:1-5 John 16:12-15

In listening to today's readings, we must remember that the definition of the Trinity we learned in our Baltimore Catechism – “three persons in one God” – wasn't formulated until the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, more than 130 years after John's gospel was written. It certainly wasn't a “dogma” his disciples understood either on Easter Sunday evening or on the day after Jesus' ascension. It took many generations before his followers were able to put their experiences of him/her into such precise words.

Yet, even before followers of God encountered Jesus of Nazareth, they knew when they were dealing with God they were dealing with someone totally “other,” someone who went far beyond any definitions or metaphors they could apply to one another. This is certainly clear in today's Proverbs passage.

The author actually personifies Yahweh's wisdom. Though scholars presume he or she is speaking metaphorically, they're convinced this insight comes from the writer's experience of Yahweh in everyday life. God's ability to bring meaning to that life is something which symbolically stands outside any “normal” individual's personality. If we're expected to make sense of creation, God's wisdom must have been “poured forth” before creation began. To surface meaning in creation is to surface God in creation.

Centuries after Proverbs was composed, people began to experience Jesus of Nazareth. And the more they experienced this itinerant preacher, the more they experienced dimensions of God they hadn't surfaced or noticed before. As Paul of Tarsus realized in his own life, when he gave himself over to the risen Jesus in faith and love, he also received the same Spirit which had driven Jesus throughout his earthly ministry. Amazingly, he reminds the Christian community in Rome that one of the places he most noticed this Spirit was in a situation he never could have imagined his/her presence before it actually happened: affliction.

Affliction is usually something we try to avoid. Yet, because of the Spirit's presence, Paul began to recognize a unique endurance, character and hope that he could attain no other way. Instead of affliction being a lack of something, the afflicted Apostle found himself overwhelmed with “the love of God,” a love that only could have come through the Spirit which Jesus had instilled in his followers. What a Spirit-filled insight!

Writing about 35 years after Paul's martyrdom, John reflects on even more aspects of Jesus' divine personality, especially when it comes to his Spirit. Though he's convinced the risen Jesus totally identifies with Yahweh/Father, he's also certain that Jesus' Spirit is the force which breaks the limits of this Galilean carpenter's earthly ministry. John's Jesus assures us, “I have much more to tell you, but you can't bear it now. But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth.”

Followers of Jesus don't just repeat what the historical Jesus said and did. They believe the Holy Spirit is leading them through doors the historical Jesus never went through, doors most of his early disciples didn't even know existed. One example which immediately comes to mind is slavery. No Christian biblical author ever condemns slavery as such. Paul even sends the runaway slave Onesimus back to Philemon, his master, something Christians wouldn't even think of doing today. Without Scriptural backing, we can only blame Jesus' Spirit for leading many Christians to the forefront of the abolition movement.

But there's a problem. If we acknowledge Jesus' Spirit as the force behind such a radical change in our culture, into what areas is that same Spirit leading us today?

Maybe we'd feel more comfortable if we could conveniently forget about that Spirit dimension of God's personality.