

APRIL 28, 2013: FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 14:21-27 Revelation 21:1-5a John 13:31-33a, 34-35

I always reminded my high school marriage course students, "There's no one action that everywhere, to all people, always shows love." Because love revolves around giving ourselves to others, we're dealing with two "variables:" ourselves and the others. No two people are exactly alike; no two situations are completely parallel. Besides, people and situations change. That's why couples take vows on their wedding day. If nothing in our lives changed, we wouldn't need to make such solemn promises. I presume those who are married for 60 years give themselves to their spouses in different ways than those married for five years. Once we give ourselves in love, we have to develop specific ways to show that love day by day.

This insight makes Jesus' gospel command, "Love one another as I have loved you," the challenge of our lives of faith. It would have made more sense, and would have guaranteed more compliance if, at the Last Supper, he'd simply passed out a handful of Xeroxed pages with the concrete actions he expected his followers to do for everyone, in every place, and on every occasion. As we hear in today's first reading, this generic love thing can lead to problems.

When the church of Antioch originally sent Paul and Barnabas out on their first missionary journey, they never expected the report the pair would give when they eventually returned to their home base. "They called the church together and reported what God had done with them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles." Though the Antiochene community was one of the most liberal churches in early Christianity, sending missionaries to evangelize Gentiles as Gentiles certainly pushed even their envelope. We know from an earlier section of Acts that, "some Cypriots and Cyrenians ... came to Antioch and began to speak to the Greeks . . . proclaiming the Lord Jesus." But their actions seemed to be the exception. Paul and Barnabas turned that exception into the rule. Gentiles were now being admitted into Christianity on the same level as Jews. Hearing their report, I presume many conservative Jewish Christians immediately employed Chester A Riley's most famous radio quote: "What a revoltin development dis is!"

Yet I also presume those in Antioch who were concentrating on the love aspect of the risen Jesus' faith would have said, "It's a great development! That's what happens when you love."

Of course, we never know what's going to happen when we love. We're always discovering new dimensions in our relations with others.

Before 1920, when American women were given the vote, many men thought they were giving themselves to women by keeping them liberated from politics. They shouldn't get their pretty little hands dirty by engaging in such a necessary evil. Most loving husbands and fathers were willing to sacrifice themselves for their wives and daughters by taking care of that unsavory aspect of democracy. Only the most liberal saw how loving the women in their lives also demanded they open every aspect of their institutions to those women.

Though we smile at these well-intentioned conservative arguments today, we must admit that we have no idea what a loving future holds for all and each of us. Perhaps the author of Revelation hits the theological nail on the head when he continually speaks about a new heaven and a new earth.

We who follow Jesus have committed ourselves to follow a biblical God who always "makes all things new." But those "things" don't become new on their own. The newness only comes from communities who honestly believe their destiny in life revolves around loving as Jesus of Nazareth loves.

MAY 5, 2013: SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

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

Sometimes Luke - the author of Acts - oversimplifies very complicated issues and events. Today's first reading provides us with a classic example.

Some have referred to this first century gathering of the Jerusalem church as the first ecumenical council. But historically, it can't be put into that category. Besides, today's passage certainly isn't a contemporary description of the event. Luke writes at least 40 years after the gathering took place.

We know from Paul's seven authentic letters that the "Gentile Question" wasn't solved as quickly and definitively as Luke tells us. It took years before a majority of Christians came on board, permitting non-Jews to become other Christs without demanding they first become Jews. And even Luke's orderly account of the Jerusalem church's decision on the issue has some glaring inconsistencies. Why, for instance, when Paul later confronts "Judiazers," doesn't he show them the Jerusalem letter which settles the issue once and for all? That document is never again brought up or even referred to.

But whether Luke's providing us with actual history or an idealized account of it, his method for solving problems in a Christian community is clear: you bring the whole community together and discuss it until a solution is reached by all. One person doesn't issue a decree from on high. The Holy Spirit works through everyone, especially when they're gathered as church.

Such a decision making process was unique in the ancient world. Followers of Jesus quickly learned they were in uncharted waters. That's one of the reasons the author of Revelation constantly talks about a new this, and a new that - as in today's reading, a "new" Jerusalem. Once Jesus rose from the dead, everything was different for those who imitated his dying and rising.

No wonder John, the last evangelist, continually brings up the Holy Spirit during Jesus' Last Supper discourse. Writing in the mid-90s, he's already experienced two basic changes from the time of the historical Jesus: the delayed Parousia and the switch from a Jewish church to a Gentile church. He not only knows things can change, they actually have changed.

Today's Last Supper pericope presents us with a somewhat different concept of the Spirit's task than we'll hear later in chapter 16. Here Jesus simply says, "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you." The Spirit seems to be the Reminder-in-Chief. But in chapter 16, Jesus takes the Spirit one step further. "I have much more to tell you," he tells his disciples, "but you cannot bear it now. But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth." In other words, the Holy Spirit will take us beyond the teachings of the historical Jesus and help us surface what the risen Jesus is telling us today.

In my articles and talks, I frequently mention Avery Dulles' sarcastic aside during his 1969 St. Louis University Bellarmine lecture. The well-known Jesuit theologian was grateful that there was no Holy Office when the four gospels were written, else we'd have just one gospel in our Catholic bibles and references to three early Christian heretics in our history books. But his entire lecture that evening was entitled The Contemporary Magisterium. In it he stressed how, because of Vatican II, the magisterium had been broadened to include more than just Vatican issued decrees and teachings. It was his belief at that time that the whole church should play a role in the development of "official" theology.

No doubt Dulles agreed with the early church's method of discovering the risen Jesus' will for us.

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