

APRIL 15th, 2018: THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 3:13-15, 17-19 I John 2:1-5a Luke 24:35-48

One of the most significant lines in today's three readings comes at the end of our gospel pericope. Appearing to his disciples on Easter Sunday night, Luke's Jesus reminds them, "You are witnesses of these things."

This verse assures us Jesus' true followers aren't identified by the catechism answers they can rattle off, the number of indulgences they've acquired, or the religious symbols they wear. They're simply people to be listened to, witnesses to Jesus' dying and rising; not so much because they actually were in Jerusalem during Passover week in 30 CE, but because they've had the same dying/rising experience in their own lives. Since these life-changing things happened to them, they must also have happened to him. That's what makes them other Christs; they share the same experiences.

Peter can certainly witness to this unique happening. Just a few weeks before, he emphatically told one of the high priest's maids, "Woman, I do not know him!" when she asked about his relationship with some newly arrested Galilean carpenter. Now he not only cures a crippled beggar in Jesus' name, he openly chides those who took part in putting him to death. Yet he doesn't do so just to give them a guilt trip, he wants them "to convert, that your sins may be wiped away." He hopes they'll also be witnesses of Jesus' dying and rising in their own lives.

Of course, the main way our sacred authors believe we die and rise with Jesus is by undergoing a "metanoia:" a repentance. That's how he began his public ministry; proclaiming the presence of God in the lives of those who undergo a total change in their value systems. The author of I John sees this repentance as revolving around keeping God's commandments as Jesus taught them; focusing on the needs of others around us. Those who experience the risen Jesus in their daily lives because of their value-change must be witnesses of that experience. It's not something they're to keep to themselves. Others must also be invited to share in this new life.

It's important in today's gospel pericope that the two Emmaus disciples mention that the risen Jesus "was made known to them in the breaking of the bread." Though Luke's Jesus takes great pains on Easter Sunday night to prove he's "not a ghost," how do we know he/she's real today? The chief way is in the breaking of the bread.

Though most of our early Eucharistic catechesis zeroed in on Jesus' presence in the bread, we know from Paul's letters – especially I Corinthians – that second-generation Christians stressed his/her presence in one another. It was little skin off their teeth to profess faith in Jesus' presence in the bread (and wine); it was "controversial" to acknowledge that same presence in those standing or sitting around them. If they couldn't experience the risen Jesus in them, then he most probably was just a ghost.

Constant reform of the Eucharist is essential to our Christian faith. Since the Reformation we already have a huge percentage of Protestant communities who rarely participate in the breaking of bread. One need only read the minutes of the Council of Trent to discover a few of the 16th century Eucharistic abuses. No wonder reformers swore off such magical practices.

As the late Bishop Frank Murphy taught our North American College class of 1965, "It's your job to form the Eucharistic community into the Body of Christ." Nothing should stop us presiders or the participants from carrying out that ministry. If we worry only about saying the right words and performing the right gestures we'll never have a true breaking of the bread, and never help anyone become a true witness, even ourself.

COPYRIGHT 2018 – ROGER VERMALEN KARBAN

APRIL 22nd, 2018: FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 4:8-12 I John 3:1-2 John 10:11-18

One of the most difficult things for modern Christians to pull off is to put ourselves in the environment of our Christian sacred authors. What triggers them to write, and for whom are they writing? They certainly aren't writing for followers of Jesus in the 21st century.

I grew up in the 20th century, a period when we regarded our priests as the community's "other Christs." They alone did what the historical Jesus did. They, for instance, could definitively forgive sins and make Jesus present in the Eucharist. No one except priests could do either. Those who wanted to receive the "effects" of Jesus had to have priests around.

During my grade school days, I especially felt sorry for Catholics in communist China. How could they get into heaven? The authorities had killed or expelled most priests. Though someone could make a perfect act of contrition and have his or her mortal sins forgiven without priestly confession, our pastor one day mentioned that he didn't think any of us could ever make a perfect act of contrition. It was beyond our ability. That meant Chinese Catholics were doomed! (Not to mention those unfortunate Chinese who weren't Catholic.)

Early Christian communities didn't have to face those problems. No one person was essential to carrying on the ministry of the risen Jesus. As we know from Paul's letters, the community together makes up the Body of Christ. It's not complicated. Different people in that body simply have different gifts of the Spirit, enabling them to minister as the risen Jesus to one another. There's no clergy or laity. No one is "ontologically different" from anyone else. Should a minister die, the Spirit simply makes certain someone else steps in and takes over that ministry – without that person having to go through years of seminary training.

That's why, in today's Acts reading, Peter was able to heal the "cripple." He's simply taking over the historical Jesus' ministry. If Jesus healed, Peter heals. The essential thing is simply to continue doing what Jesus did. One reason Luke wrote Acts was to let his readers know this continuation is going on. These "other Christs" are functioning well. Because they've made the Christ the cornerstone of their lives, the historical Jesus has become the risen Jesus.

We need only read I John's passage to hear the identification the writer presumes exists between the risen Jesus and the members of his community. We, like Jesus, are actually God's children. But in the future we'll become even more than that; we'll eventually "be like him." These first century Christians are something else!

But they also accept the responsibilities of their uniqueness. Not only do they look at Jesus as the good shepherd in their midst, as other Christs, and readers of John's gospel, they must also be involved in shepherding. It's one thing to marvel at how the historical Jesus conceived of his ministry of unifying and caring for people, but it's a whole other thing to conceive of ourselves in that same position. If he was able to pull this off over 2,000 years ago, why can't we do the same today?

No wonder the gospel Jesus speaks about "laying down" his life for the flock. Bringing people together is a life-long process, especially when it comes to including "those other sheep who do not belong to this fold." It takes many "deaths" to make people one. It's far easier to build walls than bridges.

Our sacred authors never planned to write a collection of proof texts intended to maintain an institution. Their goal is simply to encourage their readers to become the person they describe, not a member of the clergy or laity, but another Christ.

COPYRIGHT 2018 – ROGER VERMALEN KARBAN