

APRIL 29th, 2018: FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 9:26-31 I John 3:18-24 John 15:1-8

To correctly interpret Scripture, we must take ourselves out of our day and age and put ourselves in the day and age of Scripture's original readers. For instance, most of us who read today's Christian Scriptures are members of various institutions which have been promoting the "Christian religion" for centuries. We have specific rules and regulations we're expected to follow, clear-cut dogmas to which we're committed to adhere. Our first century Christian authors, on the other hand, were part of a movement, not members of an institution. Instead of following definitive rules, regulations and dogmas, they were simply expected to follow a person: the risen Jesus among them. How they accomplished that often differed person to person, but as we hear in today's three readings, there were certain "things" which applied to everyone.

It's clear from today's gospel pericope that John and his readers considered themselves branches of a vine which, because of Jesus' resurrection, had been growing for just over 60 years. The Christ and his/her disciples had been one throughout those three generations. "I am the vine," John's Jesus proclaims. "You are the branches." Unlike many religious institutions today, the evangelist was much more interested in his readers becoming one with the Christ than in becoming one with the institution. The goal always is to "bear much fruit;" to bring as much life into this world as the vine originally produced. No one could pull this off by himself or herself. It all revolved around being branches of the risen Jesus.

Of course, those branches could only produce fruit by being "pruned."

Years ago I heard an interview of well-known botanist reflecting on his recent visit to Japan. He traveled there to advise fruit growers how to get more production from their trees. "The problem was immediately clear," he said, "they almost never pruned their trees."

He quickly picked up a pruning tool and began sawing off some of the over-abundant branches. After a minute or two demonstrating the proper technique, he turned around to ask for questions, amazed to see several of the growers with tears in their eyes. "I had destroyed the natural, beautiful symmetry of their trees."

He handed the pruning tool back to them and said, "You can produce beautiful trees or you can produce fruit. You can't do both. The choice is up to you."

In some sense, that's also the dilemma facing Christian churches. We can create beautiful, inspiring, well-ordered institutions, or we can produce the fruit Jesus expects of us. We can't do both.

Though Luke shows us a very ordered church in his Acts of the Apostles, it's clear from today's passage that, behind the scenes, a lot of pruning was going on. Instead of immediately receiving the newly-converted Saul with open arms, the Jerusalem community is standoffish. How can they be certain his Damascus Road conversion story is really true, and not just a slick gimmick created to arrest more Christians? If it weren't for Barnabas, the future Apostle to the Gentiles would have been left out in the cold. But even after he's rendered "acceptable," his confrontative style creates so many problems that the community's solution is simply to give him a one-way ticket back to Tarsus. To say the least, he was disrupting the church's order.

That also seems to be why the author of I John zeros in on the basics of the faith, totally ignoring its "beauty points." We're to be judged only on how "we keep (Jesus') commandments and do what is pleasing to him." There's no other way to produce fruit.

Is it possible some Catholics today are trying to take the pruning tool out of Pope Francis' hands? Maybe there's still time to stop him reshaping the church.

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MAY 6TH, 2016: SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48 I John 4:7-11 John 15:9-17

I learned very early in my religious career that one sign the Roman Catholic Church is the one and only “true” church revolves around the conviction that only the Roman Catholic Church has never changed through the centuries. Though other churches have frequently changed, we’ve toed the line, never altering our beliefs, never modifying our practices. We believe and do whatever Jesus commanded us to believe and do at the Last Supper.

Then I fell into the diabolical heresy of studying Scripture.

Among other things, I learned the earliest followers of Jesus followed the risen, not the historical Jesus. They were much more concerned with what the Christ among them was teaching and expecting of them than what the Galilean carpenter had taught and expected of his original disciples a generation or two before. The historical Jesus certainly wasn’t irrelevant, but through his resurrection he had morphed into a new creation, a person who, as Paul believed and taught, was as much a Jew as a Gentile, a free person as a slave, and a woman as a man. He/she not only was concerned with what happened to his fellow Jews in Palestine between 6 BCE and 30 CE, the risen Christ now also cared about those who lived years later, in places far beyond Palestine, Jews and non-Jews alike. That’s why the members of this unique community didn’t hesitate to change. But they certainly didn’t change for change’s sake. There was a method behind their “mobility;” a method we hear especially in today’s gospel pericope. A method revolving around love.

John’s Jesus couldn’t be clearer: “This is my commandment: love one another as I love you.” Notice, he doesn’t say, “Love one another as I have *loved* you.” The evangelist has him refer to the present, not the past. Jesus of Nazareth didn’t show love once upon a time, he/she, as the risen Christ, is giving us love right here and now. It’s ongoing.

I frequently reminded my high school marriage course students that there’s no one action which to everyone, in every place, at every time shows love. Signs of love change as the people around us and the circumstances they encounter change. We who are commanded to love must always be alert to employing actions which show love to this particular person, in this particular time and place. For Christians, change isn’t a curse, it’s a loving necessity.

Love of others is at the heart of Jesus’ faith, as the author of I John insists in our second reading. “Let us love one another,” he writes, “because love is of God: everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God.” Since to biblically *know* someone or something is to experience someone or something, the author is telling his readers, “The only way we can experience God in our lives is to love one another.” There are no shortcuts.

One of the reasons Luke originally composed his Acts of the Apostles was to let his community know how a church that began as 100 percent Jewish in the 30s, was, in the mid-80s when he wrote, quickly becoming 100 percent Gentile. A real sea change! Though Luke assures us that the Holy Spirit was certainly behind this fundamental switch in membership, most scholars are convinced that, on just a natural level, when Jewish Christians began to love Gentiles as much as the risen Jesus loved them, they couldn’t understand why non-Jews couldn’t also be other Christs. Love eventually opened up the Christian community to love as the Christ loves.

Though this insight flies in the face of my childhood catechism classes, unchangeableness isn’t a sign of divine authenticity; it’s simply a sign we’ve refused to love.