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Power to forgive

Roger Karban | Apr. 15, 2012 Spiritual Reflections

The Sunday after Easter always has the same Gospel, one we should hear at least once a year.

It?s more than just a narrative about Thomas? initial lack of faith in Jesus? resurrection and his eventual conversion to that essential Christian belief. As in all Gospel empty tomb and post-Resurrection appearances, John the evangelist provides us with serious insights and implications of that Resurrection. This event isn?t just something that once happened to someone else, giving credibility to his teachings and lifestyle. If we?re imitators of Jesus, it affects the very core of our own lives.

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Biblical Christians presumed they were ?other Christs,? chosen by Jesus to carry on his ministry. From the earliest account of the Lord?s Supper we possess (1 Corinthians 11:23-26) we know reception from the eucharistic cup was the outward sign of a disciple?s determination to continue his work. He lives in and through us -- all of us. We?re just as called by God as the Gospel Jesus was called by God.

1 John 5:1-6
John 20:19-31

Full text of the readings [1]

To whatever ministry we?re called, John is convinced we can?t do it without the Holy Spirit.

It?s important for John that Jesus gives his Spirit to his disciples on Easter Sunday evening. The instant they believe he?s alive, they become alive; now breathing with the same breath that enlivens him: the breath of the Holy Spirit. Like the risen Jesus, they?ve become a new creation. And as a new creation, they?re expected to do new things in new ways, to give up the mindset of the old creation.

Nothing is more counter to that old creation than forgiveness. It?s to be at the center of his disciples? ministry. ?Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them; whose sins you retain are retained.? (It?s important to note that the Gospel Jesus never refuses forgiveness. The retain part seems to be added to remind his followers of the consequences that flow from refusing to forgive, not to encourage them to do so.)

Though Luke has a different slant on the Holy Spirit than John, he still believes Jesus? Spirit is the force that determines a Christian?s unique behavior. In today?s Acts passage he point out just how unique the followers of Jesus actually were. ?The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of their possessions were their own, but they had everything in common.?

Luke?s not talking about religious communities of single men or women. He?s describing the daily lives of everyone in the Jerusalem church: a total self-giving group of people concerned that there be no poor among them, that everyone be treated equally.

There?s just one problem with this picture. Paul supplies us with a different image of some early Christian communities in 1 Corinthians 11:27-34, which describes a church with little self-giving and lots of selfishness.

Many scholars presume that in Acts 4:32-35, Luke is employing a literary device known as Uhrzeit als Endzeit: the beginning is actually the end. In other words, the community he describes is actually the community he expects his readers to create down their road of faith, not one that historically existed years before. Instead of pining for ?the good old days,? he expects us to become more determined to do what?s necessary to bring about ?the good future days.?

The author of 1 John agrees with Luke?s vision of an ideal future community. But it can only be achieved by those willing to ?love God and obey his commandments.? Like all Christian biblical authors, he believes that self-sacrificing forgiveness must be part of that love. That?s why he ends his passage with the reminder, ?This is the one who came through water and blood, Jesus Christ, not by water alone, but by water and blood.? Some in his community seem to have presumed that just because they had been baptized (water) every good thing would fall into place for them. The writer mentions blood (crucifixion) as a way of saying we also have to die if we?re going to actually bring about the loving environment Jesus intends his communities to create. There are no exceptions.

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