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May 14, 2017

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Today's Gospel begins with Jesus asking his disciples to have faith in him. It ends with his astounding statement that those who do so will accomplish even greater works than he did himself. That combination should be understood as a foundational principle of the Christian community. When we take it seriously we hear Jesus calling himself the revealer whose mission must be carried out by followers whom he trusts as much as he asks them to trust him.

The Acts of the Apostles shows us multiple ways in which the early Christian community took Jesus' trust and call to mission to heart. In today's story from Acts we see the community facing a serious challenge from within. The problem of internal dissension and intramural jealousies presented them with a challenge far more dangerous than persecution from outside. The issue itself was actually simple enough: the community had grown so much that the established leadership couldn't respond to all the needs and one faction was not being attended fairly. The Greek speaking widows were not getting the daily help they needed while the Aramaic speakers were apparently well served.

Faced with their inability to care adequately for all the people, "the twelve," the group that had reconstituted itself after Jesus' resurrection, put their trust in the discernment of the entire community to resolve their problem. The solution they

came up with was to name seven men to see to the unmet needs. What should really not surprise us is the fact that we don't hear anything more about the daily distribution of food; that problem was somehow resolved and in the meantime Stephen and Philip, the only two of the seven to be mentioned again, began to exercise the same ministry as the apostles.

Today's reading from the First Letter of Peter picks up on that idea. Whether or not the first Peter wrote it, the letter is a call in his name for the entire community to take responsibility for their vocation. He twice reminds them that in fulfillment of ancient prophecies, they are a royal priesthood and that includes the fact that they are a chosen race, a holy nation and God's own people. According to Peter, baptism has changed everything for these people. While their baptism may have been for their own good, the emphasis here is on what it calls them to do, and that is summed up in the idea that they are to live out their call as a priestly people, a living temple.

If we want to take these Scriptures seriously in this time of preparation for the feast of Pentecost, we must ask how they apply to our church community of the twenty-first century. The Greek speaking Christians and the widows among them were probably not considered the "mainstream" of the primitive community, but when they spoke up the community responded by expanding their pool of ministers.

As we hear about the unmet needs of the Greek speaking widows we should find it impossible to ignore their contemporary counterparts in the Middle East. We must ask ourselves as Christians how we are calling the community together to respond to their needs. When we hear that we are called to live our vocation as a priestly people we need to think about what that implies for our ecclesial situation today. In December of last year, the *National Catholic Reporter* reported that the Chicago archdiocese has 766 priests to serve 2.2 million Catholics today and that they project having a total of 240 priests in 2030. This reality, mirrored in almost every diocese in the country if not the whole world, demands that we ask ourselves as Catholics how we are calling our community to discern ways to respond to our people's unmet hunger for sacramental ministry. (See <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/cardinal-cupich-shoulders-chicagos-catholic-future>)

When we look at our world we can well feel that the problems of evil and injustice are insurmountable. That's a reasonable conclusion for anyone who does not have

faith. But Christian faith is founded on trust that God works in history to bring about the unimaginable. Those who choose to accept Christ's invitation to place their faith in him and the Father can believe that the true way to life is found by following him through the confrontation with evil into a victory that only God can bring about. The Gospel tells us that Christ gave his life for us and has entrusted us with his mission. In turn he asks for our trust so that as we take on his mission we will bring it to fruition in new and greater ways, ways as faithful and creative as those devised by our Christian ancestors.

God, grant us the courage to change the things that only we can change and only with your grace.

ACTS 6:1-7

In Acts 6, we hear about how the primitive Christian community faced their first major internal problem. All the activity of the Spirit that had taken place among them, the signs and wonders, effective preaching and community sharing looked fabulous on the outside, but life on the inside of the community didn't always measure up. Problems of persecution didn't have nearly the negative effects of a pair like Ananias and Sapphira who were dishonest with the group. As their numbers grew so did tensions among factions that were slightly diverse. When Luke says that the "Hellenists" complained against the "Hebrews," he's referring to Jews who spoke different languages. The Hellenists who spoke Greek may have been more sophisticated than the Hebrews whose first language was Aramaic. On the other hand, the Greek speakers may not have grown up in the Holy Land and weren't probably among the ones who had been closest to Jesus in his lifetime. Such are the petty differences that can be the devil's workshop.

What we know for sure is that there was tension between the groups and that the Hellenists felt slighted because the needy of their community weren't being treated the same way as those of the other group. What to do? The twelve principal leaders, smart enough to avoid making an executive decision that both sides could complain about, took the problem to the community as a whole. So the community elected seven assistants who would take responsibility for resolving the disputes. We call them "deacons," but that title is never given to them although the work of "serving" at tables was called *diakoneo* from which we derive their title.

A strange dimension of the story is that although the Twelve said that they couldn't neglect preaching to attend to the dole, we never hear of any of the seven performing that service. The only ones among them whom Luke even mentions later have nothing to do with the table; they actually continue the same prophetic ministry as the Twelve, making them more like successors to the apostles than people with a unique ministry. (Philip goes on to preach to Samaria and Judea and Stephen worked signs and wonders and preached up to the moment of his martyrdom.)

If we want to look to the earliest Christians for models to follow today, we may well decide that their process of decision making is more important for us than the solutions they found for specific problems in their communities. The situation Luke records for us here is one in which the community had increased so much that the original leaders couldn't adequately serve everyone. People's needs exceeded the leaders' capacity to respond and they recognized the situation as a call to adapt their practice and communal structures to their new circumstances.

Facing that problem, the Twelve demonstrated their faith in the Holy Spirit among them by calling on everyone to create the resolution. Here we see an example of the moral and spiritual growth that Jesus' original disciples have experienced. The group of twelve who had made themselves famous for competition and jealousy in Jesus' day were now able to share their authority with the assembly. Not only that, but while the original idea seemed to be the creation of a second tier ministry, "It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to serve at table," the people named by the community picked up on the very same tasks as the Twelve, essentially expanding the group of twelve rather than creating a hierarchy of ministries.

Luke ends this part of the story with a summary saying that the community continued to grow in numbers. He subtly underlines the new egalitarian style of ministry by adding that even priests were joining them, leaving behind the stratified temple ministry. Obviously for Luke, continued growth affirmed the direction the community had taken to confront their problem.

1 PETER 2:4-9

This selection from 1 Peter plays with the images of stones and priesthood. Christ is depicted as the precious, living stone which is both the foundation of God's new community and a scandal to trip up any who reject God's plan. Following that image,

the author calls on the community to allow themselves to be built up as a new spiritual center founded on that living stumbling block.

While that idea could well have led to talk of a community cemented together by grace and standing like a citadel or new temple for all people, Peter did not develop it that way. The image of the building, even one made up of living stones, seemed too static to describe the vocation of the Christian community. So Peter went on to invite the people to take up their priestly vocation.

The first description of the priestly people calls them holy and gives them the task of offering spiritual sacrifices. The Second Vatican Council's Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church describes what that means by saying that the faithful people make up the royal priesthood by their participation in the Eucharist, their imbibing of the word of God and their charity (*Ad Gentes* #15). The second time Peter calls the community a royal priesthood, he explains that their task is to announce the praises of the one who called them from darkness to light, in other words, to preach the Gospel.

This reading builds on the legacy of the Twelve in Acts by calling the community not simply to call forth additional ministers, but to be a community active in ministry. If the reading from Acts focused on the community's need for additional ministers, 1 Peter is calling that community itself to meet the needs of the whole world.

ACTS 8:5-8, 14-17 JN 14:1-12

Today's Gospel brings us back to the table of the Last Supper. As John organized his Gospel, the Last Supper, from the washing of the feet to the final prayer (13:1-17:26) takes up five of the 21 chapters of the Gospel in which the only significant action was Jesus' washing the feet of his disciples. All the rest is comprised of Jesus summarizing the essence of what he had taught about himself, his relationship to the Father and the life he offered the disciples.

As our selection opens, Jesus has told the disciples that he is going away, that Judas will betray him and Peter will deny him. Jesus' next statement, our opening line, is "Do not let your heart be troubled." This is perhaps the only place in the Gospel where Jesus tells the disciples not to imitate him. John has told us that Jesus had been "troubled" on various occasions: at the death of Lazarus (11:33), when he

announced the coming of his hour (12:27), and when he spoke of being betrayed (13:21).

Because John has been so clear about Jesus being deeply troubled, he gives us the impression that Jesus is speaking from his own experience when he calls the disciples beyond their distress. When Jesus tells them not to be fearful he contrasts being troubled to having faith: they can be troubled or have faith, but not both. Fear springs from the assumption that you will be overpowered, trust is based on the confidence that God is with you even if you cannot imagine a good outcome. In calling for their trust, Jesus assures the disciples that they will never be alone. Yes, he is going away, but that doesn't imply that he will be absent from them. That idea provides the lead-in to his talk about his Father's house.

In the early part of the Gospel Jesus had berated the people who desecrated his "Father's house" by making the temple a marketplace. He then declared that when they destroyed the temple, he would raise it up in three days, a statement John clarified by saying he was speaking of the temple of his body. Thus, in typical Johannine fashion, Jesus actually identified himself as the Father's dwelling place, the person through whom the disciples would experience peace.

It will take a while for the disciples to understand what Jesus was telling them. From their day to our own the idea of "many dwelling places" has fired imaginations with many images. But if we hear this in the light of John's patterns of thought we realize that Jesus was not talking about architecture but presence. Because he dwelt in the Father and the Father in him, his promise was that he was the way for his disciples to do the same. Their faith, their committed union with him would bring them into the same relationship with the Father that he himself enjoyed.

Planning: 5th Sunday if Easter

By: Lawrence Mick

Today's readings suggest another theme for mystagogy today. The first reading recounts the establishment of the office of deacons in the early church. Though their function in those times is less clear historically than this passage would suggest (deacons in Acts do much more than serving at table), the incident reveals several points worth our reflection.

Notice, first, that this is a process of compromise to heal a division in the church. The Gentiles were calling for more attention from the Twelve. The Twelve wanted to focus on preaching the word of God. The solution was to create a different ministry to tend to the distribution of food.

Second, this teaches us that the church can create new offices to fulfill the real needs of the community of faith. We are not forever locked into the past; the Spirit can guide us today as in the past.

Third, the ministry of serving the community is a diverse one. For too long, Catholics thought that all ministry belonged to the priest (presbyter). We had forgotten the plurality of ministries that existed in the early church. Pope Francis' call to study the question of women deacons today is a first step to further rethink the diaconate.

Our second reading broadens our view even further by reminding us that all the baptized share in the priesthood of Christ: "Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." We are still a long way from fully recovering that truth in our assemblies. I suspect that many Catholics still see the Mass as the action of the priest rather than an action of the whole assembly over which the priest presides.

Unpacking the meaning of baptism (i.e. mystagogy) includes deepening an awareness of the priestly mission of the baptized. Not only are all the baptized called to offer the eucharistic sacrifice, but they are also called to offer the sacrifice of their lives every day in service of the Lord. We are baptized to carry on the mission of the church; baptism is not just for our personal benefit but for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Preachers and planners might focus today on the various ways that the priesthood of Christ is exercised in the world, both through ordained ministries and through the priesthood of the faithful.

Compose petitions that pray for each form of ministry in the church. Pray for the strength to fulfill the ministries entrusted to each member of the assembly. Pray for those served by the various ministries. Pray for vocations to priesthood and diaconate, but also pray for full acceptance of the mission by all the baptized.

Prayers: 5th Sunday if Easter

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

We are reminded today that spreading the word about Christ did not go smoothly in the early church. Understanding and accepting Jesus was a slow and often unsuccessful process. It may seem different now, but if we consider our own questions and struggles with faith, we realize that our commitment is not formed overnight. It is often subject to life circumstances that challenge our faith. There is still work to be done in spreading the good news. If we want to contribute to the effort, we might begin with ourselves.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you called your disciples to have faith in you: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life": Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you have gone to prepare a place for us: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider My friends, let us pray for all who struggle with faith or have needs of any kind.

Minister For the church and for all entrusted with spreading the good news to the world ... we pray,

- For all those places in the world where religion or religious differences cause pain or violence ... we pray,
- For all who struggle in their understanding or acceptance of Christ ... we pray,
- For the courage to ask faith questions without belittling or diminishing others ... we pray,
- For women who have helped shape our faith; for women caring for others in impossible situations ... we pray,
- For those for whom Mother's Day is difficult: those mourning the loss of children or the loss of their mothers and for those whose mothers caused them pain ... we pray,
- For those among us who are most in need, especially the sick and dying; and for those who have died ... (*names*) ... we pray,

Presider Gracious God, we seek to do your work and to make Christ known to others. Give us the courage to live as we are called and help us when our faith

falters. We ask this in the name of Jesus who promised to be with us. Amen.

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