Spirituality
Scripture for Life



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In today's selection from Acts, we meet Philip the Evangelist. He was one of the first deacons, but more than that, he was a missionary and the father of four prophet/missionary daughters. Although it might seem that Philip's preaching in Samaria offered little in the realm of "foreign" missions, history suggests that the opposite may be true.

The Jews and Samaritans shared ancient roots and the kind of long-term animosities that only happen among closely related groups. Thus, Philip, a Hellenist (Jew with a Greek heritage), ventured into adversarial territory, hoping he could get a better hearing than would a Hebrew Christian.

The reason this selection appears in today's Liturgy of the Word is primarily its mention of how the Holy Spirit came upon the people who had begun believing in Jesus. Historically, this reveals something of the development of faith in Christ and the Trinity. In this story, as in Acts 19, we hear of a variety of baptismal practices. There was the baptism of John for metanoia — the new outlook necessary to recognize the reign of God. Philip's baptism, performed in the name of Jesus, ritualized belief in Christ and his resurrection.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 14, 2023

Acts 8:5-8, 14-17
Psalm 66
1 Peter 3:15-18
John 14:15-21

Finally, baptism was done in the name of the Trinity (Matthew 28:19-20). Peter and John's completion of baptism in Samaria, calling down the Spirit, symbolized full reconciliation and unity among Jewish and Samaritan Christians.

We see that Acts insists that those who were baptized with John's ritual (Acts 19) or simply in the name of Jesus needed something more. When Jesus was no longer humanly present among them, they needed the gift of his Spirit in order to participate in the life of the risen Christ.

Today's Gospel selection from Jesus' last discourse follows directly on last week's and deals with the situation disciples would face when the human Jesus was no longer among them. Orienting them about how they were to live, Jesus explained, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

That is no dry injunction to obey; Jesus refers here to the depths of the covenant and his people's daily prayer (Deuteronomy 6:1-9). To *keep* the commandments is, in the words of Jesuit theologian Silvano Fausti, to put into action what flows from "the love of a heart that knows it is loved."

In spite of Jesus' love, the disciples knew their own weakness. Jesus recognized their anxiety and promised, "I will not leave you orphans." Helping them face his coming absence, he didn't set up any structure for them, but promised, "I will ask the father ... [for] *another Paraclete* to be with you always."

The word, "another," implies that the coming Spirit would act as he had among them: leading and teaching them. He took that to a new, unfathomable depth by promising, "I live and you will live ... You will realize that I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you."

This promise, repeated in a variety of ways in this discourse, means that disciples can live like Jesus did. As Jesus speaks of the Father and the Spirit, he is inviting us into the love life of the Trinity, the divine community that created the universe simply to share love with creation.

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Jesus promises that our relationship with God can be like his: "I in my Father and me in you."

Perhaps the first thing these readings invite us to is a reassessment of our own baptism and its consequences. Most of us were baptized long before the age of reason. (Have we gotten there yet?) When have we appropriated, considered, chosen and accepted the grace involved in being consecrated to the Trinity and included in a community of disciples, evangelists and prophets? To whom have we given "an explanation for the reason for our hope"?

In the long run, the promises Jesus made us, his invitation into union with God through Christ, are not about us. That union, the grace of baptism, the communion of the Eucharist, are all for the sake of mission.

That is the Christian understanding of the commandment to love God and neighbor. The deeper our love for others, the more passionate we will be for their good, the more we will want to communicate our reason for hope and the more we will be open to hear theirs, knowing that God is not bound by structures or denominations, but is pneuma, a free Spirit who blows in whom and where she will.

Let us not act like orphans, but be evangelizers who embody the joy of God's Spirit among us.

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