

A Sermon by Fr. Davenport
13 April 2008

Easter IV, Year A

Acts 2:42-47

1 Peter 2:19-25

John 10:1-10

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Malcolm Muggeridge observed, “Every happening, great and small, is a parable whereby God speaks to us, and the art of life is to get the message.”¹ I love parables. Parables help us apprehend truth through picturesque analogy. Jesus frequently used them to explain things, but since they’re poetic, they generally lack the certainty and clarity of declarative statements. In a way, our liturgy is a great, multi-faceted parable.

S. John appears not to have enjoyed them much. He includes only two in his gospel. S. Luke has over forty.² John has different interests and a different way of expressing himself. His Jesus doesn’t announce coming of the Kingdom of God, but rather Jesus preaches about himself and his own importance. In long discourses, Jesus talks about his identity. John’s Jesus frequently says in a pointed, dramatic way, “I am;” it’s a way he connects himself with the divine Name – I am that I am, I am who I am. John appears more interested in doctrine than in popular narrative. He’s moving the Church from story to creed.

Today’s gospel is one of his two parables. It is complex, inconsistent, highly evocative. It presents the popular image of Jesus as the door through which we pass into life and sets up Jesus as the Good Shepherd. What we may overlook is its connection to S. Peter and Jesus’ passion.³ The Greek word translated as ‘sheepfold’ in the parable is the same Greek word that is also translated as ‘courtyard’ when Peter is standing outside the high priest’s courtyard as Jesus is being tried.

In that horrible night, the high priest interrogated Jesus about his teaching. Despite his life being in danger, Jesus didn’t equivocate. He held fast to what he had taught, to what he had done, to who he was. Jesus had integrity. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, was ready to lay down his life for his sheep.

Simultaneously outside the courtyard, Peter skulked in the darkness and endured his own interrogation. Three times someone asked him about his association with Jesus. Peter lied. He was not true to Jesus or himself. Jesus always said, “I am.” When asked if he’s a disciple, Peter said, “I am not.” Peter had promised to lay down

¹ Malcolm Muggeridge, *Simpson’s Contemporary Quotations*, James B. Simpson. Houghton Mifflin Comapny (1988).

² John Drury, *The Parables in the Gospels*, SPCK (1985), pp. 172-73.

³ Samuel Wells, *Power and Passion*, Zondervan (2007), pp. 140-44.

his life for Jesus, but when the moment of danger came, he abandoned him. We might identify Peter with the hireling, the one who is not a shepherd and runs away when the wolf comes.

Most of us can identify with Peter's weakness, the limits of his faith, his failure to risk danger for Jesus and the gospel. Despite all of this, the risen Jesus raises Peter up and gives him new responsibility. Three times, Jesus tells Peter, "Feed my sheep." Jesus hands his staff to Peter to be a shepherd, to lead the Church to pasture. Peter is the ultimate authority figure of the Church, and his story reminds us that the Church is fallible, that the Church makes mistakes, that to err is Christian.

Usually error isn't as clear cut and obvious as betraying a friend. Often the difficulty is figuring out what's a mistake and what isn't. We don't always agree about how to be faithful, how to be true to Jesus, or even to ourselves. So conflict and controversy has always been a part of Church life. Conflict and controversy are not signs of weakness, but of strength and health, of desire to be true to Jesus, of passion for the gospel. Jesus provoked conflict and controversy wherever he went, not only between himself and the Pharisees, but also among his disciples.

A holy way to respond to Church conflict and controversy is to recall the apostles and to promote the Church's continuity with them. Today's reading from Acts tells us how we maintain continuity with the apostles.⁴ It outlines the fundamentals of Christian living. As we heard last week, we're to continue in "the apostles' teaching and fellowship, and the breaking of bread and in prayers" – four ways we experience the presence of the risen Christ.

First, the apostles' teaching means staying focused on witnessing to the risen Christ and his good news for all people. Keep the main thing the main thing. It's also about engaging seriously and deeply with Christian tradition and reflecting on the implications of the gospel for the way we live. The apostles' teaching challenges us to reform ourselves instead of giving us fodder to condemn and separate ourselves from others.

Second, the apostles' fellowship emphasizes the importance of community building, of developing strong relationships and uniting people from every nation under heaven. It's about unity in diversity and diversity in unity, a reflection of the mystery of the Holy Trinity. It also implies adhering to the apostolic ministry through the laying on of hands – what we call 'holy orders.' We have continuity with the apostles through our bishop, the Bishop of Washington, who is our apostle.

Third, the breaking of bread, of course, doesn't refer to an developed system of sacraments. The Church didn't officially have seven sacraments until roughly the 13th century. But the breaking of bread does imply that the mystery of the Eucharist nurtures the apostolic community, entrance into which is through baptism. This blossoms into a mature system of sacraments and pastoral care.

⁴ This section from Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts*, Brazos Press (2005), pp. 59-60.

Fourth, the apostles' prayers suggests that even in the first days some regular, fixed forms of prayer and liturgy were emerging, such as the Lord's Prayer, in what was otherwise a great variety of liturgical observance. The apostles prayed at the same time Jews made their daily devotions. S. Luke concludes his gospel telling us that the disciples were continually in the Temple praising God.

These four are the fundamental, authentic marks of the church: 1) teaching and learning about Christ – the creeds; 2) a loving, diverse community with bishops; 3) sacraments; 4) regular prayer and devotion. These are the core of our Christian life. These are the way we remain faithful no matter what controversy the Church experiences.

To these four, we might add the one other thing mentioned by today's reading from Acts. The apostolic community had all things in common. They pooled their wealth and distributed according to need, that generosity, charity, and justice were at the heart of their life together. We often overlook this part. It challenges us in our own relationship with wealth. If the Church today agreed that no one could speak to any of its controversies unless that person lived such a life of generosity, charity, and justice, the silence might overwhelm us.

Obviously we can't simply dismiss Acts as communist propaganda. While the Church has generally accepted the idea of private property, it insists that private property has a relationship to the common good, that the privilege of private property comes with responsibilities. We possess things not for our own benefit, but for the common good.

Our culture has lost this sense of wealth entailing responsibility. A few years back, Timothy Radcliffe noticed that "the 400 richest Americans had an annual income of \$69 billion in comparison with the \$59 billion which was the combined income of 161 million inhabitants of Botswana, Nigeria, Senegal, and Uganda. It is," he continued, "simply blasphemous that eight million people a year die of just being poor when others are unbelievably rich."⁵ It's easy to condemn the super rich, but many of us also share a portion of the guilt.

We tend to see sharing and giving as charity or generosity, and it is to some extent, but many saints consider sharing to be simple justice. In the fourth century, S. Ambrose wrote: "The bread that you keep for yourself belongs to the hungry, the cloak that you store away belongs to the naked, the money that you salt away is the price of the poor person's freedom." That makes our excess, our abundance, stolen property. In essence, S. Ambrose calls us thieves.

Similarly, S. Basil the Great, another great early father, compared the rich who store up wealth to a person who purchases all the seats of a theatre performance and

⁵ Timothy Radcliffe, *What is the Point of Being a Christian*, Burns and Oates (2005), p. 153.

then doesn't let other people come to see it.⁶ So to Basil we're not thieves, but self-absorbed and cruel. Reflecting about our relationship with money is humbling.

More and more in our culture, money means everything. The apostles understood that it can separate us from God. Jesus told us, "You cannot serve God and mammon." Money and material things aren't bad. But money has become more than a way to exchange things. People accumulate money now as a way to store power, a way to control other people, a way to validate their own existence. In this way, it's opposed to God. There's the way of power, and there's the way of Jesus: acquisition versus gratitude, force versus freedom, control versus service.

Accumulating money is a way we try to make ourselves God. It's our apple tree. Its fruits are dissatisfaction and grasping instead of gratitude and contentment. What matters most is not what we achieve or acquire, or what we fail to achieve or acquire, but what we are. We're children of God. First, we're grateful that we exist. We give thanks to God for the gift of our lives.

Why did the risen Jesus go back to Peter, seek his love, make him a shepherd? Certainly, it wasn't for what Peter did. It's because Jesus loved him. Our lives have meaning not from what we've achieved or acquired. Our lives have meaning and possibility because God loves us.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 152.