

Acts 2:38-39, 42-47

Psalm 118:1-4; 12-15a; 17-18; 22-24

Sung Response: *Alleluia, sing forever! alleluia, sing forever!*

How good to sing God's praise! How wonderful is our God

1John 5:6-11, 1

Matthew 28:11-15

Christian Community: Reality or Illusion?

May 1, 2011 2nd Sunday in Easter

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This week's readings appear, and in many ways are, quite disparate. Is there a common thread in these readings? And, if so, what is it?

The first reading from Acts, written toward the end of the first century, describes life in the first Christian community after Jesus' death, the community that gathered in the upper room in Jerusalem. The writer's description is characterized as idyllic by commentators. Virtually no Biblical scholar believes it provides an accurate historical record. Acts describes a community of believers devoted to instruction and common life, a community that lived together and shared "all things in common". That's "all things" in common. Believers prayed in the Temple daily, and broke bread together in one another's homes. Acts says they sold their property and goods, sharing the proceeds with one another according to need. A similar, but even more emphatic picture, is painted in Acts 4:32-37. We learn in Acts 5, however, that community life wasn't as idyllic as described. When Christian Ananias, and his wife Sapphira, sell some of their property and withhold part of the proceeds from the community, they're struck dead. This picture of life in the earliest church in Jerusalem, is based on a culture no longer extant and one incompatible with current culture. But R[...], G[...] and P[...] will be available next week after Mass for you to turn in the deeds to your homes, the pink slips to your cars, your bank account numbers and your investment accounts for the use of MMACC and our common needs. This IS, of course, a joke! But you get my point about the significance of culture in the style of Christian community developed. The most similar communities in the church of our time are monasteries and religious orders where members share all things in common, except for the persons in charge who routinely travel more often, eat better and have more spending money!!

The reading from 1 John speaks to and from a community of a slightly later period than Acts. It describes three symbols important to this faith community: water, blood and spirit. Each, the writer says, is a witness that Jesus was "of God" and is God's Messiah. For the writer addressing these early Christians, God revealed the eternal quality of all life in Jesus' resurrection. Wherever this community was located, it was not in Jerusalem, was not comprised of predominantly Jewish-Christians and was steeped in the dualism so foundational to Greek philosophy of the time. Like the community described in the first reading, this community was shaped by its culture and the beliefs of its culture. It adapted its interpretation of Jesus to one which made sense in its culture. It translated a concept of Jesus based on Biblical concepts, unknown to a Gentile audience, into a concept of Jesus based on philosophical concepts familiar to a Gentile audience.

The gospel reveals another aspect of community. Jerusalem at the time of Jesus was, of course, Judean in culture and Judean in faith. Jesus challenged the mainstream interpretation of Judean religion and faith. In this gospel story, the institution fought back, doing what it deemed necessary, including deceit, fraud and bribery, to discredit Jesus' life and teaching. Fearing Jesus' followers would claim he was risen from the dead, the chief priests commissioned soldiers to guard Jesus' tomb. Then, when the soldiers reported Jesus' body was gone despite their military presence, the chief priests bribed the guards to say Jesus' disciples came during the night and stole his body. The guards accepted the bribe and disseminated the story. In this gospel passage, we see the forces of culture and institutions at work. It was too often the culture of Temple leaders to invest themselves in political affairs, rather than restricting themselves to religious affairs. Here the institution acted to prevent a challenge to its integrity after Jesus' death even more threatening than the challenge his life and teaching posed. It is the way of institutions.

We experience similar institutional responses in our time. When Kathryn Jeffers Shorri was elected Bishop in the Episcopalian church, Roman Catholic leaders discontinued ecumenical dialogue with the Episcopalian church. The latter's ordination of a woman bishop challenged the integrity of the Roman Catholic institution's commitment to gospel values; so, quietly, without notifying Catholic people around the world, RC leaders quit talking to Episcopalian leaders. With a woman bishop, Episcopalian tradition is not worthy of ecumenical dialogue.

All concrete manifestations of religious community embody all of the factors reflected in these readings: the influence and impact of culture; the focus on certain symbols to promote community self-understanding; and institutional reactions designed to discredit and squelch the experiences of community members which call the integrity of the institution into question. Christian community is no different. These same factors figure in any concrete manifestation of Christian community. To know and understand that these factors were at work in even the earliest Christian community, underscores their inevitability but also their significance. What is illusion to some is reality to others. Each Christian community, if authentic, must adapt gospel values to culture as we know it, either by embracing its compatibility or taking counter-cultural stances. Each Christian community must honor those symbols of the tradition which speak most meaningfully to them based on their experience of life in the world, the cosmos. And each must deal with the on-going efforts of institutional leaders to nullify some expressions of faith, either by endorsing institutional suppression or confronting it. It's what happened to Jesus; it's what happened in the earliest churches; it's what's happening today. It's what's happening in community at MMACC. We walk the paths of the saints who came before us.