

3rd Sunday of Eastertide

Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 116: 1-4, 12-19; Luke 24:13-35; I Peter 1:17-23

Luke 24:13-35 is the well-known story of the “Walk to Emmaus”. This story is unique to the Gospel of Luke. In it, two followers of Jesus (one is named Cleopas and the other is unnamed) were walking to Emmaus, a town not far distant from Jerusalem. They were both feeling profoundly sad at the death of Jesus and confused with the rumors of his resurrection. They are joined by Jesus, who is obviously not recognized by them. He asks after their sadness and is consequently lectured on Jesus’ death. But it is clear that they do not realize that this stranger with whom they are talking is Jesus. “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (24:27). But even with this sharing from scripture, these disciples do not recognize him.

What caused them to finally realize that it was Jesus with whom they were walking and meeting? Jesus is invited by them to take dinner with the two travelers. And the text tells us, “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him” (24:30-31). And just to be sure the reader has gotten his point, Luke tells us that when these two followers returned to Jerusalem and shared their experience with the disciples, Luke concludes, “Then they told what had happened on the road, and how Jesus had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread” (24:35).

Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of the bread! For the third time in Luke, the formula for the sacrament of holy communion is presented – “he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them” (24:30, but also see the feeding of the five thousand in Luke 9:16 and the institution of the Lord’s Supper in Luke 22:19). In each case, the four-stage formula is used – taken (i.e., chosen, called), blessed, broken, given. It is the formula for Holy Communion. But it is also the formula for the authentic following of Jesus.

In the story of the feeding of the five thousand, Luke first presents the formula, “And taking the five loaves and the two fish, Jesus looked up to heaven and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd” (Luke 9:16). Jesus’ lesson to the disciples that day was quite clear. You want to minister to and reach out to the world in compassion, bringing society into both relationship with God and the embracing of the Jubilee kingdom? The only way you can do that is to be like Jesus. You must recognize that you have been chosen and called to be used by God (i.e., “taken”). You have been blessed by God for God’s service in the world. And to be of service, you must be willing to be broken as both the bread was and as Jesus will be. Then, and only then, can you be given for the sake of the world. Only blessed and broken bread can feed a multitude. And only blessed and broken lives reach out to the world in a transforming way. This is Jesus’ call (which Luke will later present as realized as a life taken (chosen), blessed, broken and given: Lk. 22:19). And this is Jesus’ call to each person who would be his disciples. For it is through the living out of that formula that Jesus is both made known to us and made known through us to a blessed and broken world.

Acts 2:14a, 36-41 begins with the assertion, “But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made

him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (vss. 14a, 36). It is the end of Peter’s initial speech, the sermon that we examined in last Sunday’s lectionary commentary. But it is this ending that is such a powerful ending, an ending that encapsulated the entire sermon.

Peter declares that the Jesus that Israel’s and Rome’s leaders executed is “both Lord and Messiah”. The titles used here for Jesus are not merely casual titles. The word “Lord” (Greek: *kyrios*) is the term used for Yahweh throughout the Older Testament, while the word “Messiah” (Greek: *Christos*) is used for the God-anointed monarch of Israel, and in particular the “monarch-that-is-to-come who will set Israel free of its oppressors”. Therefore, the message Peter is giving to his listeners is that Jesus is God’s agent for Israel’s liberation (salvation) and is of equal status with God! It is unheard-of language that had never been spoken before!

And the crowd reacts as if these words had never been used in tandem before. Their response is a most profound response. “Now when (the crowd) heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him”. And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation”. So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added (to the church)” (2:37-41).

Peter’s sermon evokes a powerful response! Just how powerful is that response is captured in two ways. The first is the carefully-chosen words selected by Luke to tell of this initial response to the Gospel message. The second is the number of people who embrace faith in Christ.

The carefully-chosen words that describe the response of the Jewish crowd begins with their question, “Brothers, what should we do?” That is no casual response. Luke artfully brackets the work of the Jubilee Jesus with two speeches given to two Jewish crowds – the first given by John the Baptist before Jesus is baptized (and thus begins his ministry), the second given by Peter after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. That Luke intends for this bracketing to occur is captured in the fact that both crowds ask exactly the same question, “What should we do?” And the answer by both John the Baptist and Peter is virtually the same: “Repent and be baptized so that your sins may be forgiven” (Luke 3:3, 10; Acts 2:37-38).

What are the crowds actually being told to do, both by John the Baptist and by Peter? They are to “repent” and “be baptized”. The word “repent” (Greek: *metanoeo*; the noun is *metanoia*) literally means “to reverse course” or to “turn around”; it means to change your mind and your actions, to radically redirect yourself. Our English word, “metamorphosis” comes directly from this Greek word. In the context of Luke and Acts, it means to stop accepting the standards of a society centered on domination, greed and control, and instead embrace the spirit of Jubilee, sharing your wealth, showing mercy toward the marginalized, caring for one another and loving God -- and thus eliminating poverty and oppression. It is to turn from one standard of living life to embrace another standard (and Luke makes clear what the Jesus standards of life are in 2:42-47).

Secondly, they are to “be baptized” – that is, to perform a public ritual that declares to all the world, and especially to those who observe it, that this person has repented (*metanoeo*) and is now going through this “*metamorphosis*” into becoming this new person of Jubilee political, economic and spiritual priorities. Thus, the church had “converted” baptism from John’s use of it to Peter’s use, so that it has become the sign and symbol of initiation into the Jubilee Jesus way of life!

But Peter carries his call to people further than John the Baptist had. He adds to John’s traditional formula, “Repent, and be baptized” the words “*in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*”. Baptism is to be done “in the name of Jesus the Christ” (or ‘the Messiah’). We are to “take on” the name of Jesus.

This is a hard concept for 21st century Americans to emotionally grasp; we may intellectually come to understand what ancient people were meaning by taking on a person’s name, but we don’t emotionally resonate with it. That is because to us a name is nothing more than the means that identifies us. That means could just as easily be a number (as it is in the tax and identification systems of the United States government) or a binary code (as it is in the world of computer technology). But the name of a person in the first century captured the very essence of that person. Therefore, for one to be baptized “in the name of Jesus the Christ” meant that one was taking on the character, objectives and mission of Jesus. One’s “metamorphosis” was to be so complete that one was, in a profound sense, ceasing to be the old controlling, greedy, dominating person he or she use to be (symbolized by his old name) and had now become a “Jesus-one”, a “Christ-one”, a “Christian”!

Only by “taking on” Christ through the ritual of baptism could one thus experience the reality, “that your sins may be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”. The Greek word translated “forgiveness” (*aphesis*) has a profoundly different meaning than does its English counterpart. When normally used in English, the word means “to pardon” or “to cease to feel resentment toward” a person. But in the Greek, *aphesis* was an economic term. It meant specifically the remission of a debt.¹ Thus, by using this word, the early Christians indicated that they perceived the work of atonement as being primarily the remission of a debt. The Jubilee Jesus remains faithful to the Jubilee tradition that, every 49 years, debts were to be forgiven, slaves set free, land returned to its original owners and thus wealth redistributed so that power could not accumulate in the hands of an elite few. Thus, he “remits” people’s sins, so that their indebtedness (whether it is financial, political or spiritual) can be “forgiven”.

The result then, of being released from the heavy burden of one’s debts (again, whether financial, political or spiritual), is that those who have now chosen to be “Christ-ones” through baptism “will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”. These new “Christ-ones” will now be empowered by the “dunamis” or “dynamite” of the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Holy Spirit is the indwelling of the power of God within, between and among us who are the “Christ-ones”. That indwelling power will enable the followers of Jesus Christ to exercise the gifts that God gives to them (I

¹ The economic meaning of the word as it appears in the ancient Greek is still somewhat preserved in English today, because we will speak of a loan being “forgiven”. However, the word is normally used for pardoning the actions of a person as we put resentment behind us, not releasing one from a loan.

Cor. 12:4-11), to live out “the fruits” of the Holy Spirit in their lives (Gal. 5:22-23), and to carry out the mission into which God calls each of us (Eph. 1:3-23).

Finally, Peter ends this amazingly-compact statement of the nature of Godly salvation with this even more amazing statement. “For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him” (vs. 39). This promise of the upside-down kingdom in our lives and permeating our midst as we work for a Jubilee world is a promise extending to “you, your children, and for all who are far away”. That is, it is for those in the Temple that day, listening to Peter who have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to them. But it is also for their children. It is also for the Jews who are dispersed throughout the entirety of the Roman Empire. And it is for the Gentiles!

But it is not a proclamation for all Jews or for all Gentiles. It is for “everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him”. That is, salvation is God’s doing, not ours; it is God’s calling, not ours; it is God’s choice, not ours (John 6:37; Eph. 1:4-5). It is not so much that we seek God as it is that God seeks us and woos us to himself. This is how Peter understood the work God had done for humanity through Jesus Christ. And so, those who were called responded. “Those who welcomed this message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added (to the company of the “turned-around” ones)” (2:41).

Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19 is a hymn of praise to God in which the Psalmist offers thanksgiving to God for recovery from a near-fatal illness. It begins with the most personal statement imaginable.

“I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplication. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live” (vss. 1-2).

There is no expression of love of God for the sake of love of God. Gratitude to God is most unabashedly based on what God can do (and has done) for this hymn writer. God “heard my voice and my supplication” and “inclined his ear to me”. The psalmist cried, “O Lord, I pray, save my life” (vs. 4), and God did so! Therefore, this writer will praise and love God. It is a purely responsive theology – God did good to me when I most needed it; now I will do good to him by praising him.

But although the psalm begins on such a pragmatic note, it eventually moves beyond that to a more grateful and far more eloquent act of praise.

“What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people. Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones. Lord, I am your servant; I am your servant, the child of your serving girl. You have loosed my bonds. I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the house of the Lord, in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise the Lord!” (vss. 12-19)

The setting for this portion of the psalm (and, perhaps, the entire psalm) is that of the formal thanksgiving offering of Israelite worship (Leviticus 6:11-21; cf. King Hezekiah's prayer in Isa. 38:10-20). The thanksgiving offering (also called "the offering of well-being") was to be offered after recovery from a severe illness. It consisted of two parts. The first was an act of worship, performed in the Temple in Jerusalem (cf. vs. 18-19) "in the presence of all his people". The priest was to offer both a burnt offering to God and a meal offering made into cakes (like a pancake). The second part of the thanksgiving offering was a celebratory banquet with one's family and friends, in which a toast was made to God ("I will lift up the cup of salvation" – vs. 13) and consume together the burnt offering. The banquet could last as long as two days, according to the Torah, but on the third day, any part of the carcass of the burnt offering was to be destroyed by burning it to a crisp.

It is clear that what is being described in Psalm 116 is the thanksgiving offering, both in the grateful worship of God and in the celebration of the Psalmist's friends over his recovery. Like today's gospel lesson, this Psalm reminds us of the Eucharistic nature of the Hebrew thanksgiving festival, as we "raise the cup" to God, break the sacrificial bread and consume the flesh of the One broken for us! By so doing, we witness that we, too, have been delivered from the deepest of spiritual death, but that we are delivered to submit our bodies as a thanksgiving sacrifice for our Lord (I Cor. 11).

I Peter 1:17-23 resorts to economic terms to describe God's redemptive work for humanity through Jesus Christ, just as is the case in today's lesson from Acts. "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors," Peter writes, "not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish" (1:18-19). When one has broken the Law and has been found guilty, there are two courses of action open to him or her. First, he can make restitution to the government and to the people for that crime by serving time in prison, or he can pay a stiff fine of "silver or gold" that will purchase his release. Either way – through the paying of money or through the paying of time (since time is money) – one has "paid the price" for his transgression and is "ransomed"; he has thus earned release from prison and forgiveness by the state for the crime he has committed.

Well, Jesus has done the same thing for us, Peter suggests. Our living our lives to dominate others, to feed our greed or to control our situation are crimes both against God and humanity, even if they might not seem to be crimes according to Roman law. We ought to have to pay restitution for those crimes. But rather than our having to do so, Jesus has acted to "ransom" us, "not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with his precious blood". In dying for us, Jesus has acted to free us from the otherwise-inevitable consequences of our sinfulness. Jesus was destined to do this on behalf of the world "before the foundations of the world" (even though it has only happened lately). And the evidence that all this is true is Jesus resurrection from the dead. Only God could perform the miracle of bringing one back to life. And that act of resurrection has been done with Jesus as God's clear indicator that God meant his death to ransom us from the otherwise-inevitable consequences of our sinfulness!

If this is true – and indeed it is – then what are the implications of this truth upon our lives? Peter answers, "Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth, so that

you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God” (vss. 22-23).

Jesus’ death has, in essence, “purchased” you from your former way of life. So you have been “bought with a price” for a new way of life. It is as if you were formerly a slave. You have been purchased to be set free by your new master. Now live in “obedience to the truth”, living out that truth in your love for one another. As Eugene Peterson so graphically paraphrases verse 23, “Your new life is not like your old life. Your old birth came from mortal sperm; your new birth comes from God’s living Word. Just think: a life conceived by God himself!”² So, as newly birthed Christ-ones, act accordingly!

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² Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: the New Testament in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1993), p. 574.