

Divergence on the Lectionary - Second Sunday of Easter, Year B

First Reading

Acts 4:32–35

Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (ESV)

Second Reading

1 John 1:1-2:2

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 20:19–31

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”

Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Our reading from Acts today is part of one of two passages that scholars consider to be Luke’s uses of Greco-Roman “friendship traditions.” (Acts 2:44-47 and 4:32-37) The phrases “of one mind” and “having all things in common” were frequent among the philosophers of the day, as well as having less-well-defined meanings among common folk.

Among Christians these verses evoke reminiscences of a lost “golden age” of Christian community. But reading the phrases about having one mind and holding things in common in the context of their cultural setting dims the glow of that utopian vision a

bit. The first thing to recognize is that common ownership of property did not mean the abolishment of private ownership in the philosophies of the day. Of the philosophers whose work I read about, none of them suggested that there should be no private property. Rather, the idea seemed to be that property should be held in private but used for the common benefit.

Even this sense of common benefit among “friends” needs to be qualified though. In the philosophies of the day, “friends” were those who *already* were of one mind, that is, of the same social status. Giving of one’s property (gifts) was expected to be reciprocated. Failure to do so was actually taken as a sign of enmity, so one did not give gifts to those who could not.

This only leaves the social role of “benefactor.” This is the manner in which the upper class used property for the benefit of those who could not return the gift. Such gifts were not reciprocated in kind, but with honor, while at the same time being viewed as something of an obligation.

So, for me, Luke’s use of these phrases is not intended to lift up an ideal from the first generation of Christians, but to redefine these tropes for his intended audience, people who knew them rather well.

First, in Greco-Roman parlance, “friendship” tended to reinforce social boundaries. For Luke, they break them down. Jesus teaches:

Luke 14:12–14

He said also to the man who had invited him, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” (ESV)

In like manner, in the verses immediately after our reading today, Barnabas, a wealthy land owner, sells (some of?) his land and comes and in all humility lays the proceeds at the apostles’ feet. There is no return of honor for his benefaction.

Now here is where I’d like to go well beyond any of the articles I’ve seen or seen footnoted so far. I can’t blame the authors for not seeing the larger picture here. This understanding of Luke and Acts comes from a Spirit centered reading that just isn’t a part of their experience.

As is so often the case with readers of the Bible who lack a Spirit-focused lens, their readings seem “flat” to me. Because they lack the dimension of Holy Spirit, all they see are Luke’s attempts to invoke that image from Acts as a means of urging his intended audience to do likewise. If we are to read the text as they do, we must infer that such “oneness” is not a part of Luke’s experience any more, but one that he’d like to see “return.”

I read it very differently. Luke, among the evangelists, describes the work and effects of the Holy Spirit more than anyone but John. The Holy Spirit hovers over the entire two volume work in a way that none of the evangelists begins to recount. In a way, even Jesus takes a back seat, as He is only a part of the first book. Peter and Paul take the lead in the Acts narrative, and all three are led and empowered by the same Holy Spirit.

From this I understand that Luke’s was a Holy Spirit driven community (much like John’s) and that what Luke relates in his telling of the stories of Jesus and the early church are interpretations of those stories as understood from a Holy Spirit perspective. So Luke is not recalling an idyllic past as a contrast to current philosophic notions, but using that language and that setting to describe his own experience of community, of friendship, as empowered by Holy Spirit.

Because even in our own day, that is how Holy Spirit operates. We can see it in subtle ways, the way that the Gospel has (much too slowly, for my taste) eroded social boundaries. (Causing many in our day to fight furiously to re-establish them.) But we can also see it in dramatic ways. My favorite illustration is one that I probably cite too often, but it is that of the outpouring of Holy Spirit at Azusa Street in the first decade of the last century. In a reclaimed cattle barn in Los Angeles, benches were made of boards on upturned buckets and people of every race, every social stratum, sat side by side, women and men alike. The scandal of these gatherings were an inseparable part of their glory. From this revival, much of what we know as modern “pentecostal” and “charismatic” Christianity poured fourth.

Telling of Azusa Street doesn’t mean that I think we should pursue the equality that reigned in those walls. It is my way of saying that if we would like to see that kind of equality, we would do well to pursue the Holy Spirit with the single mindedness of William J. Seymour.

Plato and Aristotle were right to criticize the idea that common ownership of everything, to the exclusion of private property, would result in chaos. I do not believe that such ideals can be sustained as ends in themselves. They are byproducts, byproducts that I think Luke knew and experienced, of a powerful indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Second Reading

These words from the First Epistle of John are pretty familiar. Some of them find their way into our liturgies. But reading them, studying them apart from their context robs them of layers of meaning that turn them into general aphorisms that John wouldn't have recognized.

When we read the Johannine epistles it is important to hold the author's situation in the back of our minds, even when that situation doesn't present itself conspicuously. The situation that brought these letters into being is one of conflict. There is the author of the letter and those who follow him, then there are those who have "gone out" from that leader, that group. Finally there is also the group to whom the letters are addressed in hopes of drawing them into "fellowship" with the author's group.

When we read this text with those divisions and conflicts in mind, the first word that begins to pop in a new way is "fellowship." Those who acknowledge their sin and seek forgiveness "walk in the light." And those who walk in the light "have fellowship with one another." I think we can reasonably infer from this that those who have "gone out" maintain on some level that they "have not sinned." It would be interesting to speculate on just how that is meant, but I will refrain except to recall the way that the Corinthian congregation also maintained that "all things are permitted." There may be a strain of Christianity in these early communities that felt that to be "in Christ" in some fashion made it impossible to sin.

The other word that draws my attention in this passage, given the division the author writes about elsewhere is "propitiation." That's a word I heard in worship as part of the "comfortable words" following the confession and absolution for most of my life before I bothered to try to understand it. A propitiation is something done to appease someone, in this case, God. My Bauer Arndt and Gingrich tells me that *hilasmos* can just as easily be translated as "sin offering." It is something done to try to re-establish favor that has been lost.

This is especially important in light of the apparent likelihood that there are some who "say they have no sin." This wouldn't be such an issue if all the groups represented in these letters believed that one might still sin after accepting salvation through the Blood that "cleanses us from all sin." It seems highly improbable that any of these groups thought that they had *never* stood in need of forgiveness. But if some argue that once a person has entered into that fellowship (I assume through baptism) they can no longer sin, then Jesus' continuing role as "propitiation" becomes a sticking point.

The best way I can try to describe this difference is between “walking sinless, having been forgiven” and “walking in constant need of and receipt of forgiveness.” Sometimes I think that latter position has been used to grind people down rather than lift them up, and for that reason I think some Christians lean toward the former. I get that. But I still think that walking in an awareness of ongoing redemption is more powerful than once and done. But that’s just me.

Gospel Text

Whew... Last year sidestepped commentary on Thomas completely and noted three other possible lines of study from within our text, they were:

1. Was the gift of the Holy Spirit in verse 22 a complete gift (my words, trying to summarize) or more of an anticipation of the full gift at Pentecost?
2. The meaning of Jesus’s words in verse 23 about forgiving sins.
3. The “Purpose of the Fourth Gospel” as it’s described in verse 31.

Given that Thomas didn’t ask for anything beyond what the other disciples also needed (they didn’t rejoice until Jesus showed them His hands and His feet) Thomas “doubt” is just not that interesting to me. He asked for what he needed, and he received it.

But the “authority” to forgive sins (or to withhold forgiveness!) was much more important for me to write about and so I did (line 2), with the promise that I’d try the others in subsequent Divergences on 2 Easter. This year I’m going to discuss (or try to) number 3, but I’m going to tag last year’s discussion onto the end, here, because I think that verse 23 has been so badly abused by the church over the millennia. (You can click [here](#) to skip down to that if you’d like.)

But as to line 3, and the question of the purpose of the Fourth Gospel as we find it in verse 31...

I was astonished (some of you may have known this for a long time) when I started studying John 20 that there is a long-standing disagreement among scholars about what John saw as his purpose in writing. The disagreement could be said to focus on the identity of the “you” in verse 31. I don’t know why, but I always assumed/accepted that John meant “believers” when he said “you” in that sentence. The peculiarity of this verse makes it awfully important. In it the author steps out of the role of storyteller and speaks directly and self-referentially to the reader/hearer of the text. I can’t think of another instance of this anywhere in the Gospels.

So establishing who it is that John is addressing is really important, and it isn't as clear as I'd always thought.

The question is basically this: Is John writing primarily to people who already believe and who need to have their faith supported, or does John have in mind those who have not yet come to faith?

It would be a mistake, judging from what I've been able to read, to say that these goals are mutually exclusive. That the text was meant to function within the Johannine community and also as an evangelical tool seems impossible to deny. But which was the author's primary intended audience?

A good deal of the answer comes down to text-critical questions and issues around present subjunctive versus aorist subjunctive verbs, along with the way that the verb for "to be" (*eimi*) is used in John and throughout the New Testament. In other words, if I tried to make sense of all that I've just read for you, you'd be as sleepy as I am.

So, for brevity's sake (for a change!) I will share what I've learned and how I now see verse 31.

First, verse 31 is better translated, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that the Christ, the Son of God is Jesus, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

So, the question that the John seeks to answer is not "Who is Jesus?" but rather "Who is the Christ?" This then suggests that John's primary intended readers/hearers are those who have some idea of a Messiah, a Christ, but do not know who that person is. In other words, non-believers. The verb "believe" speaks of coming to belief, not continuing to believe. (Although for John, all true belief is also continuing belief.) John seems to have written his Gospel as an aid to the community's work of evangelizing Jews and related God-fearers.

This discussion among scholars doesn't appear to be anywhere near consensus, but for me, this is the most convincing way of understanding John's purpose. It will be the backdrop for the way I read the Fourth Gospel going forward. (Until another paper changes my mind?)

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And here is what I wrote last year concerning the "authority" to forgive sins.

...You see, when Jesus says, “ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld,” that’s not what He said. What He said was, “If you forgive the sins of any, they have been forgiven them. If you withhold forgiveness, it has been withheld.”

In both those sentences the verbs at the end of the sentence, forgive and withhold, are in the perfect tense. The author of the article that got me so excited then quoted five or six Greek grammar textbooks, and they all said pretty much the same thing, “The perfect indicative indicates a past action as present to the speaker.” In other words, Jesus is saying that whatever forgiveness the disciples declare or withhold is a completed past event as present to Jesus when he said it.

Now the author of this article (J. R. Mantey) points to this accomplished reality because he’s arguing that the phenomenon of “sacerdotalism,” that is, the notion that certain persons have the authority to bestow or withhold forgiveness (that is, an ordained class of Christians) is unsupportable by this text or the texts from Matthew 16 or 18 that are traditionally cited in favor of this clerical prerogative.

He also points out that no early Christian writer of the first two centuries cites any of these texts in support of sacerdotalism. And he shows that in fact, early Latin translations of these three texts were mistranslated into the future tense to support their arguments. It is clear that these texts just didn’t say what these early Latin writers wanted them to say.

Now, as a priest from that tradition (that’s what sacerdos means - priest), I might be inclined to steer clear of this accurate reading of John (and Matthew) except that it is perfect keeping with what Jesus says of Himself and His own actions earlier in the Fourth Gospel. “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.” (John 5:19)

So what Jesus says to the disciples after He breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit,” is this; “Now that you have the same Spirit that I have had all along, you will do what I’ve done, that is, do what the Father has already done, forgive sins. And you will only withhold it from those from whom the Father has already withheld it.”

I won’t go into the absurdity of asking who those people are from whom God would withhold forgiveness. The simple answer is, “Nobody.” But Jesus adds that because it must be maintained that God has a choice in this. God doesn’t withhold forgiveness because He chooses not to, not because He must.

And I have no authority, nor does any Christian, to withhold that which God does not withhold. Not for anyone, not for anything. It is because of the Gift of the Holy Spirit that I can see what the Father is doing, and align what I am doing with what He's already up to.