



100th Anniversary of the Council on Christian Unity

Worship Resources

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5. Fourth Sunday of Easter

Sunday April 25, 2010

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The Focus for Today:

On the Sundays after Easter, the congregation focuses on the effects of the resurrection. All the readings from the Gospels and Letters in the Revised Common Lectionary today focus on the effects of the resurrection of Jesus on the church as community.

All the readings emphasize that the resurrection of Jesus intends to create communities that live according to God's purposes for human beings in community. Yet, each Bible passage considers this focus from a different point of view. The material from the Fourth Gospel invokes the notion that the congregation is a flock whose shepherd is Jesus (John 10:21-30). The reading from the book of Revelation pictures a radically inclusive multicultural community in heaven rejoicing around the throne of God (Revelation 7:9-17).

*[Materials marked with an asterisk * were developed by Linda McKiernan-Allen and Ron Allen]*

Call to Worship*

Leader: In the midst of life's struggles, God filled John, the prophet, with a vision of the future.

People: In the midst of our struggles, we seek a vision of the future to strengthen us.

Leader: John said: "I looked, and there was a great multitude from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."

People: We want to join that great multitude, standing in joy before God.

Leader: They witnessed to God's purpose!

All people living together: a community of love, peace, justice and abundance for all.
When the world resisted their witness for all to live in love, they endured.

People: We, too, want to witness and endure!

Leader: So we join them, singing,

All: "Blessing and Honor and Glory and Power"

(Hymn with text by Horartius Bonar and tune O Quanta Qualia)

[OR "You Servants of God", text by Charles Wesley and tune Hanover

OR "Alabare", Latin American song found in Chalice Hymnal #29]

Opening Prayer*

O God who sits on the throne, before whom every Caesar pales, we come, eager to join the great community from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, to stand before you in praise and adoration! We come, despite robes stained with the illusion that our race and ethnicity are superior to others, knowing you will wash us and make us clean. We come, bruised and scarred, seeking shelter in you. In this sacred hour, guide us to springs of living water. Sustain us until the time that you wipe away every tear from every eye. Amen.

Significant Quote

David Rhoads, Lutheran scholar in Chicago, calls attention to a relatively new discipline in New Testament interpretation that begins with the social location of the interpreter. Often called "cultural criticism," this approach seeks to read the Bible through the lenses of the interpreter's own cultural setting, thereby de-throning the Eurocentric models of biblical interpretation that have held court since the Enlightenment in seminaries, divinity schools and universities that are primarily European in orientation. When Rhoads describes the goal of this approach, he also describes a major agenda of the church for the next generations.

"The goal of cultural interpretation goes beyond a *multicultural* dynamic to an *intercultural* (and *intracultural*) dynamic. A multicultural dynamic imagines many cultures working side by side, with each culture making its contribution but not necessarily interacting with others. The more challenging image is that of the ethnic-roundtable of interpreters where many people are *interacting with each other* around the study of biblical texts. The goal of such interaction [whether among scholars or among Christians] is not just that people accept each other and engage their interpretations but that they are changed by the interaction—seeing the Bible [and God and the church and the goal of the Christian life] through the eyes of others, having one's own interpretations affirmed and/or challenged, learning the life-giving and dehumanizing effects of different interpretations—so that, as a result, some new configuration of communal sharing and common commitments may emerge from the process." [David Rhoads, "Introduction," *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective*, edited by David Rhoads (Fortress Press, 2005), p. 8.]

Revelation 7:9-17 envisions peoples of different cultures—represented by people every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages—around the throne. As our exegesis notes, they are a

prototype for the church. According to Rhoads, they should not simply exist alongside one another, as separate but respectful cultures, but should interact so that all can learn from one another.

Responsive Action*

In 1963, *Martin Luther King Jr.*, recognizing the chasm between American reality and biblical promise, famously declared "11 o'clock Sunday morning is the *most segregated hour of the week.*"

Take a few moments for action. Invite the congregation to raise a hand or stand up if they fit the category you call out (use your own judgment about how specific you want to be)

| | | |
|--------------------------|---|----------------------------|
| <i>American male</i> | <i>first generation immigrant</i> | <i>Asian</i> |
| <i>Hispanic</i> | <i>third generation in this town</i> | <i>bi- or multi-racial</i> |
| <i>mixed race family</i> | <i>African-American/black</i> | <i>married</i> |
| <i>female</i> | <i>Irish</i> | <i>single</i> |
| <i>over 50</i> | <i>German</i> | <i>childless</i> |
| <i>adopted</i> | <i>Christian</i> | <i>under 40</i> |
| | <i>friends with someone of another race</i> | <i>Caucasian</i> |

Use this action prior to reading the scripture, refer to this action in the sermon and/or take a moment following this action to compare the Revelation 7:9-17 description of a multicultural inclusive throng with the gathered group.

Invitation to the Table*

Every year, it seems, Hollywood makes movies which picture scenarios of the future. Several recent movies have depicted the future as a time of struggle and even desolation. Perhaps the purpose of such movies is for us to think about the future we are creating by the way we live now. From this point of view, most of the futuristic movies are warnings. They show a future world of conflict, destruction, and desolation if we continue to live together as divided and separated nations, tribes, peoples and languages.

In a similar way, the book of Revelation also pictures two scenarios of the future. This prophetic book pushes us to choose which scenario we want for ourselves, for our church and for our world.

One: a future of destruction leading to desolation. It belongs to those who, like the supporters of the Roman Empire, serve idols, seek to divide the human community into competing elements, and engage in exploitation, prejudice, injustice, and violence.

Or the other: pictured in today's text. It belongs to those who gather around the throne of God. This scenario includes people of every nation, tribe, people and language. They cooperate with God's purposes for respectful, inclusive community. They wave palm branches, celebrating their

location in the immediate presence of God. Here, God shelters them, fills them, and guides them to life now and forever.

Which future do you want?

This Table is not a place of destruction or desolation. This is the Table of the Future, near to the throne of God yet already available in the present. When we partake of the loaf and the cup, we taste the truth of God with us, God empowering us.

So come, for here you will find a future made real in our today.

Notes for Preaching (based on the readings in the Revised Common Lectionary for April 25, 2010)*

Revelation 7:9-17

The book of Revelation was written by an early Christian prophet named John (probably not related to the author of the Fourth Gospel). Prophet John wrote the last book of the Bible between 90 and 95 when the congregations in Asia Minor (present day Turkey) were either actively persecuted by the Roman empire or feared being persecuted. Many members of those congregations were discouraged, and some were in danger of abandoning the community to escape persecution.

John believed God had already begun to destroy the present, evil age. Indeed, turmoil within the Roman Empire was the early stages of the dissolution of the old world (Revelation 18:1-24). . John believed Jesus would soon return to finalize the destruction of the old world (Revelation 19:1-20:15) and to bring about the New Heaven and New Earth, the Realm of God (Revelation 21:1-22:7). John wrote the book of Revelation to encourage members of the congregation to endure the present struggles so they would be a part of the new heaven and new earth.

John employs a literary technique common to the apocalyptic writers as part of encouraging the congregation: the journey to heaven. In the apocalyptic mindset, events in heaven were the prototype of events on earth. What happened in heaven was the template for what would happen on earth. In this heavenly journey motif, God takes the prophet from earth into heaven where the prophet sees the heavenly template of things to come on earth.

Revelation 7:9-17 is a vision from that heavenly journey. John sees the throne in heaven surrounded by “a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.” This throng praises God for salvation, that is, for saving them from the destruction of the old world and for gathering them into the great community of the new heaven and the new earth.

In the background of this vision is the apocalyptic conviction that in Eden the human family had been one mutually supportive community but that after the fall (Genesis 3), the human family broke into competing groups. The different nations, tribes, peoples, and languages did violence

to one another. In today's text, John sees the restoration of community according to God's original purposes.

The purpose of this vision (shared with many other visions in the Book of Revelation) is to give the congregations in Asia Minor a vision of the future that will empower them to endure the present. Since the vision is already taking place in heaven, the congregation is assured it reveals what will soon happen for the faithful on Patmos and throughout the suffering congregations on the main land.

This vision implies a contrast with the Roman Empire, which, for John, was controlled by Satan and carried out Satan's purposes (e.g. Revelation 12:18-13:10). To deceive human beings into cooperating with its demonic and divisive purposes, Satan and the Empire imitated God and the faithful. In Revelation 7:9-17, John implies that the Empire imitated God by having a throne and an international group of followers. John's congregation knew that the one sitting on the throne was neither God nor Jesus but Caesar, who was idolatrous. Caesar's decrees destroyed real community, bringing exploitation, class slavery, violence, and death.

Note the following contrasts between the vision in Revelation 7:9-17 and the Roman Empire. The throne is occupied not by Satan and Caesar but by God and Jesus. The purposes of God and Jesus are not exploitation and violence but are salvation (v. 10), helping people through the "great ordeal," the destruction of the old age (v. 14), The expectation is not power but providing generously for the people (food, drink, shade), shepherding them to eternal life, and wiping away their tears (vv. 15-18).

With respect to the focus on community we are following in the Bible lessons today, it is important to note the community gathered around the throne in Revelation 7:9-17 is multicultural: "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages." The peoples of the new heaven and the new earth are an inclusive, multicultural community. There is no indication here that the peoples lose their particular identities (nation, tribe, people, language). Through their particular identities, they serve the purposes of God as identified in verses 10, 14, and 15-18.

In John's mind, the church (still living in the old age) is called to manifest in the present the coming community of the new Jerusalem. In the midst of the competition and violence of peoples of the old world, the church is to embody the ingathering of peoples from different cultures. This motif is an invitation and mandate to today's church to bring people together. In the sermon, the preacher could explore practical ways that the congregation might accept the invitation of this text to become a community of people from different nations, tribes, peoples and languages.

However, we need to be careful here not to drift into romantic, uncritical thinking. The Roman Empire was also made up of multiple groups like the ones described in Revelation 7:9 (for example, Revelation 11:9, 15; 13:7b-8; 17:15-18; 18:23; 20:3). The difference between these two multicultural groups are that groups in Revelation 7:9 serve the purposes of God (mentioned just above in verses 10, 14, and 15-18.) while the groups sponsored by Rome serve the idolatry, exploitation, and violence of the Roman Empire. A preacher might help the congregation

distinguish between intercultural groups that serve today's Empire and those that serve the purposes of God.

This passage is a powerful affirmation for those who struggle to witness to a multicultural and inclusive church. While such individuals and communities may encounter resistance now, Revelation 7:9-17 proclaims that the template for such a community is already actualized in heaven. The calling of the church is to realize what God has already prepared.

John 10:22-30

According to the Gospel of John, existence is divided into two spheres: heaven and the world. Heaven is the sphere of immediate access to God and is a place of love, light, peace, community, sight, and life. The world, for John, is a sphere ruled by the devil and an arena of hate, darkness, conflict, alienation, blindness and death. For John, people in the world who believe in Jesus experience heaven. In the midst of the world, they live in a sphere of life with the qualities of heaven.

[For further explanation of John's world view, see Ronald Allen, *The Life of Jesus For Today* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), pp. 82-90.]

The gospel writer whom we call John addressed the fourth gospel to a congregation made up primarily of Jewish people in the world who believed in Jesus. They were in tension with other Jewish communities and thus were distressed by alienation and conflict with their kindred Jewish sisters and brothers. Many members of the Johannine community (which we could think of as the Johannine synagogue) were in danger of abandoning the community.

John writes the Fourth Gospel to assure the congregation that they do belong to the God of Israel. God has not abandoned them. John wants the people who receive this gospel to remain faithful. John wants them to see they continue to have a mission, even in the face of conflict. In the strict sense, John assures them that they are truly Jewish.

The context of today's gospel reading begins in John 10:1 with the Johannine Jesus using various aspects of shepherding to describe his relationship to the congregation. The Torah, Prophets and Writings (sometimes called the Hebrew Bible or First Testament or Old Testament) often picture God as a shepherd and Israel as a flock. As background for John 10, the preacher should read Ezekiel 34 for prototypical use of this language. In Ezekiel, God is the great shepherd who has appointed under-shepherds (leaders of Israel). Some of the under-shepherds have become false leaders and have led Israel astray. God, however, purposes to re-assert the divine shepherding and personally to re-gather the flock. God will restore Israel.

In its Johannine context, John 10:1-30 makes two broad and important points. (1) When Jesus says "I am the good shepherd," Jesus assures the congregation that, despite their current conflicts, they are part of the true flock of God. Their Jewish identity is secure. In today's reading, this theme is especially evident in John 10:25b-30. (2) By evoking Ezekiel, Jesus implies that false shepherds threaten the congregation. In John's mind, the Jewish leaders who cause the tensions for the Johannine congregation are false shepherds. By contrast, Jesus is the

good (trustworthy) leader. The flock (congregation) that remains faithful to him will experience life in the sphere of heaven. In today's lesson, this theme is implied in John 10:24-25a, and 28b.

This text has three implications for today as we focus on becoming an inclusive, multicultural church.

(a) As many leaders, congregations, and other expressions of the church move in the direction of becoming an inclusive, multicultural community, tensions similar to those felt by John's congregation emerge. People outside the church (and some within) resist the idea of the church becoming a truly inclusive multicultural community. This passage assures such leaders and expressions of the church that Jesus is still the good shepherd who claims them as God's flock.

The preacher could help ease the tensions by identifying and claiming the biblical precedent.

(b) It warns the church today against false shepherds (false leaders) who seek to maintain the current boundaries or lines of race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, positions on current ethical issues, denominational tribalism, theological perspective. The preacher could identify such leaders and warn against them.

(c) The larger context in John implicitly challenges preacher and congregations to consider whether the actual make-up of today's church is sufficiently broad. In John 10:16, the Johannine Jesus says, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold." Most scholars link this passage to John 7:35, 11:52, 12:20-21 and 12:31 and conclude that the "other sheep" are gentiles. While the gentile mission is thus much less prominent in the Fourth Gospel than in Matthew, Mark, Luke and Paul, it is still important. Does today's church bring together people who are as different as Jewish and gentile peoples were in the world of antiquity?

Closing Words*

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd."

The shepherd, seen as the Lamb at the center of the throne,
provides shelter, feeding,
guides us to springs of water and wipes away every tear.

Now, Jesus sends us as shepherds for one another
in the congregation, and for the world:
to shelter, to feed, to refresh,
and to point all people to the coming world
in which God wipes away every tear.

Possible Hymns and Songs

(Numbers in parenthesis are from the Chalice Hymnal)

"Help Us Accept Each Other" (487)

"The Voice of Jesus Calls His People" (426)

“You Servants of God” (110)

“Alabare” (29)

“Blessing and Honor and Glory and Power” (Horatius Bonar) (O Quanta Qualia)

The Writers

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Ron teaches preaching and Gospels and Letters at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. One of his recent books, *The Life of Jesus for Today* (Westminster John Knox Press) is designed to help Sunday School classes, Bible study groups, and individuals explore the life of Jesus through the lens of the Realm of God. In addition to being short and inexpensive, this volume includes questions for discussion at the end of each chapter.