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Fourth Sunday of Easter

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/042218.cfm

By Rhett Engelking

In the course of my work in faith communities, I have been approached with the question, “Why can’t you simply drop all of the controversial Christian baggage and simply rebrand as a different broad-based NGO who does the same work, yet appeals to a wider secular audience?” For anyone who has had to deal with the inner turmoil of faith communities or the legacy of an institutional church that has survived two millennia, it is a seductive question. The seduction goes beyond the mere idea of rebranding and taps into the genuine enthusiasm that comes with forging something new and independent for the benefit of humanity (or even for the Glory of God). Plenty of faith-based institutions do just that every day in our increasingly pluralistic society and avoid both the hiring constraints and identity politics that come with serving any overly-ideological mission. Frankly, there are times that I would happily let go of the baggage of having to deal with the complicated personalities that congregate around religion, if it weren’t for an important factor that is highlighted in the readings for the Fourth Sunday of Easter. There seems to be a clear reason why the early apostles emphasized that their wondrous works were done “in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean.” Additionally, when Jesus reminds us that a hired man tending someone else’s sheep “works for pay and has no concern for his sheep” he draws our attention to the personal commitment a good shepherd has to an identity and not a role. The role-oriented “hired hand” behavior can be found in modern faith-based institutions, and that is where “faith-rooted” organizations come in.

In their 2014 book entitled “Faith-Rooted Organizing,” Alexia Salvatierra and Peter Heltzel contrast faith-based organizations that adopt secular models with faith-rooted organizing that is “based in the belief that many aspects of spirituality, faith traditions, faith practices, and faith communities can contribute in unique and powerful ways to the creation of just communities and societies.” They cite historical examples of impactful initiatives like the civil rights movements that owe their success to something uniquely characteristic to the identity of its adherents as people of faith and not merely hired workers for faith organizations. This identification forms the core of Jesus’ message in John’s Gospel passage. By identifying with the good shepherd, Jesus explains why God loves him, because he understands and agrees to lay down his life and to pick it up again. Faith-rooted organizers understand that power is the driving force behind social change and that is why it is crucial that he associates this laying down with an act of power. The power inherent in the Christian identity is that it transcends the alienation of individuality yet includes the identity of individuals. “Jesus Christ the Nazorean” is not just the name of a historical figure who was martyred in ancient Palestine (Jesus the Nazorean) it is the name of the living God that transcended even that martyrdom (Christ). While asserting that Jesus is the Son of God who exerted power over life and death is not a novelty in the Easter season, the First letter of John promises of something novel that has yet to be revealed in Christ. “We are God’s children now” John says, and roots identity of the
Christian community in the present moment. Instead of stopping there, John states that the promise of that identity is that we shall be like Christ and see him as he is. If Jesus could identify with the good shepherd, loved by his Father, and possessing the power to lay down his life and pick it up again, then the same can be said of all Christians. When we are reminded that, like Jesus, we are *Imago Dei*, children of God, and members of the Body of Christ, this distinction must not be underestimated if our faith-rooted membership is to carry any meaningful power.

The power of the name “Jesus Christ the Nazorean” is an affirmation that Christians are conscious that our existence is both historical and mystical. Faith-based organizations are just as subject to the constraints of a merely historical existence as secular organizations. Organization without a transcendent and/or mystical identity is Christ subject to tribalism. It can be observed that tribalism is precisely what made it possible for members of faith-based organizations to participate in slavery, torture, and genocide throughout history and what continues to reinforce the discrimination and systemic racism of today. Faith-based organizations lost their authority to criticize secular organizations when secular institutions became the protectors of human dignity against religious extremists and the prophets of an inclusive identity against ultra-orthodoxy. While the cultural relativity and democracy of secularism has succeeded in protecting those with minority status, it is still bogged down by history and there is no guarantee that will usher in a new age of transcendence. That is why the challenge of Christianity in this new millennium is to reimagine our identity as historical and mystical. As John punctuates, “what we shall be has not yet been revealed.” If what we are is like Christ, then our identity is both temporal and transcendent. If our organizations do not reflect this inclusive identity, then the “Most Holy name of Jesus” is little more than a clever brand. The human race will not be saved through clever branding.

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