

NOTE: Because essential parts of these commentaries are edited out of the Messenger, the Catholic Newspaper of the Diocese of Belleville, Illinois, we feel it is important you receive the entire article. Therefore, those who only received Richard McBrien's essays before will receive Roger's column also.

FEBRUARY 12, 2012: SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Leviticus 13:1-2,44-46 I Corinthians 10:31-11:1 Mark 1:40-45

During a recent Krista Tippett NPR "On Being" show, Walter Brueggemann made an insightful observation. "I've given up using theological arguments to show that Scripture doesn't condemn homosexuality as we know it today. The problem is psychological, not biblical." The well-known Scripture scholar is convinced people simply don't know how to integrate chaos into their lives. He believes all of us have an image of a perfect world in the back of our minds. For many straights, it's a world in which everyone is straight. Gays bring chaos into such a world. We feel better when we can exclude them from messing up our image.

Today's three readings show us that, even if we ignore gays, lesbians and transgendered individuals, throughout history there've been other people who have wreaked havoc with our perfect world view - women and blacks, for instance. During Jesus' ministry, lepers were near or at the top of everyone's exclusion list.

Our Leviticus reading demonstrates the consequences of being a leper were so horrendous that a person's whole life could be destroyed simply by a "whispering campaign." That's why only a priest, trained in what was and what wasn't leprosy, could legally declare someone a leper, not a leper, or a cured of leper. (Notice how often Jesus, after curing a leper, sends the individual(s) to "the priests." Until the latter complete the "paperwork," the cure isn't official.)

Lepers were forced to "keep their garments rent and their heads bare;" to "muffle their beards and cry out 'Unclean! Unclean!'" And worst of all, they had to "dwell apart, making their abode outside the camp." The disturbing scenes in Ben Hur's first century CE Jerusalem leper colony were probably close to being accurate.

Because of Mark's theology, it's no accident that one of Jesus' first miracles is the cure of a leper.

My students know that the evangelists employ miracles, not to prove Jesus is God (something their readers already believe), but to show what kind of a God he is. It's clear from this pericope that Mark's convinced Jesus is a God who constantly reaches out to those who live outside the perimeters of our perfect world.

Beyond the obvious, two things are especially significant in this narrative. First, notice Jesus touches the man before he heals him. According to Jewish law, it's permissible to touch him after the cure, but not before. Those who touch lepers are expected to suffer the same social consequences as lepers. Jesus' action makes him one with someone who inhabits the space outside our ideal world.

Second, the best ancient Marcan manuscripts don't have the words "moved with pity." Instead, they read "he angrily stretched out his hand." Probably some well-meaning, pious scribe changed Jesus' "anger" to "pity."

Anger fits Mark's Jesus. The evangelist frequently depicts him as being angry. In this situation his anger seems to spring from the exclusion this leper suffers. Many experts believe the Galilean carpenter's personality trait which most bugged his historical enemies was his refusal to operate from a list of "ins and outs." For him, everyone was "in." Religious authorities simply didn't know how to deal with such complete inclusion.

This inclusive characteristic was also part of Paul's "other Christ" personality. Today's short I Corinthians reading occurs at the end of the Apostles' plea that those in the community who operate from "strong consciences" accept those who have "weak consciences." As the Body of Christ, one group can't "excommunicate" the other. Both represent the risen Jesus, as disruptive as that might be to some.

Today of all days, our sacred authors force us to examine our conscience. Who, among us, tests our image of a perfect world? If our biblical writers are correct, it's the aggravating people who bring chaos into our lives with whom the risen Jesus most identifies.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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FEBRUARY 19, 2012: SEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Isaiah 43:18-19, 21-22, 24b-25 II Corinthians 1:18-22 Mark 2:1-12

Today's gospel passage presents us with the first of five consecutive conflict stories: narratives in which Jesus or his disciples say or do something. The "good folk" immediately object. Then Jesus says or does something to resolve the conflict.

In this particular pericope, Jesus creates a conflict by assuring the paralytic, "... Your sins are forgiven." The scribes quickly demand to know, "Why does this man speak this way? He is blaspheming. Who but God alone can forgive sins?"

Jesus then follows the three-fold pattern of all gospel conflict stories and resolves the issue by telling the young man, "Rise, pick up your mat and go home." The now cured person immediately does so.

Scholars tell us that Mark seems to have chosen these particular five conflicts because these are the issues his readers should expect to encounter if they're really committed to carrying on the ministry of Jesus.

As we hear in our II Corinthians passage, Paul believes such a commitment is at the heart of his own ministry. If Jesus' response to God's call was always, "Yes!" so Paul's response to the needs of his community is always, "Yes!" There's no difference between his ministry and that of the risen Jesus. "The one who gives us security with you in Christ and who anointed us is God; he has also put his seal upon us and given the Spirit in our hearts as a first installment." The Apostle isn't referring to priests and bishops here; he's talking about all Christians.

That's why our Christian sacred authors presume forgiveness must also be at the heart of our ministry. It was (and is) at the heart of Jesus' ministry. And it creates similar conflicts for us. Many people simply feel more comfortable not forgiving than they do forgiving. We'd prefer restricting those who have hurt us to the past pains they caused, never erasing the memory of their actions.

This is where Deutero-Isaiah comes in. In one of his best-known oracles, the prophet gives us an image of a God who is always working in the present. "Thus says Yahweh: 'Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; see, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?'"

At some point in his prophetic ministry, Deutero-Isaiah realized that the exiled Jews to whom he was speaking really weren't listening to him. When he mentioned Yahweh his people thought of a God who saved Israel 700 years before in the Exodus, not the God who was saving them right then and there during their Babylonian exile. Had they been captives in Egypt and a person named Moses came in from the desert one day speaking about liberation, they certainly would have presumed Yahweh was working in their lives. But it wasn't 1,200 BCE; it was 735 BCE. And they weren't slaves in Egypt; they were prisoners of war in Babylon. In their mind, Yahweh had already "done his thing." The captives only thought about past glories, not present. Had Deutero-Isaiah known about the key line in Rick Nelson's Garden Party, I'm certain he would have included it in this oracle. "If memories are all I sang, I'd rather drive a truck."

In many ways, Yahweh's getting rid of the past is a two way street. If we forget about God's past, God will forget about ours. "It is I who wipe out, for my sake, your offenses; your sins I remember no more."

The historical Jesus obviously had a forgiving image of Yahweh in the back of his mind as he went village to village, synagogue to synagogue proclaiming God's kingdom. He wanted his followers to live their lives in the present, not the past. That meant they had to constantly forgive; and to endure the constant conflict such forgiveness creates.

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