

JUNE 16, 2013: ELEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

II Samuel 12:7-10,13 Galatians 2:16,19-21 Luke 7:36-8:3

I often felt superior to my childhood Protestant friends and family members. As a Catholic, I was part of a system which guaranteed - if I minded my institutional "Ps and Qs" - to one day get me through the gates of heaven. They, on the other hand, seemed unable to come up with any concrete procedures which could assure them eternal glory. I worried about them. They sometimes spoke about "faith" in Jesus being the way they worked out their salvation; but I was certain such an amorphous experience was too "iffy" to guarantee anything. No one ever seemed able to exactly nail down what his or her faith was all about. Where were the concrete actions - things like no meat on Friday, or going to Mass on Sunday?

Then I began to study Scripture.

I quickly discovered some of the "Catholic things" on which I prided myself were actually condemned by our sacred authors, both in the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures. Generally accepted practices like novenas or making the nine First Fridays would most certainly have been anathematized by the classic biblical prophets, who would automatically have put them into the category of "fertility cults:" special rituals employed to control God's actions in our lives.

As we hear in today's Galatians pericope, Paul clearly zeros in on our relationship with the risen Jesus, making him/her the source and goal of our salvation, reminding his community, "... By works of the law no one will be justified." Yet such an emphasis on Jesus rarely surfaces when we're "doing the church thing." I recently took part in a clergy meeting discussing plans for the institutional reorganization of our diocese. Tens of thousands of people will be affected by our decisions. But whenever the dialogue reached a problematic point, we priests instinctively turned to the "expert" in our midst to clarify the direction we should take: the canon lawyer. Except for an opening and closing prayer, Jesus was never mentioned. His gospel vision for his followers was never brought up. Laws obviously were more important than relationships.

Yet in both today's first and third readings we hear relationships trumping laws. David broke two basic Jewish laws: murder and adultery. But once he admits his guilt and falls back on his relationship with Yahweh, Nathan announces, "Yahweh ... has forgiven your sin; you shall not die.

Luke's Jesus imitates Yahweh's forgiveness in our well-known gospel passage. His Pharisee host would have had no problem with Jesus' forgiveness of the sinful woman as long as he'd insist she go through the institutional hoops set up to deal with such cases. But Jesus never demands she follow the accepted procedures. Instead, to the legal experts' amazement, he simply declares, "... Her many sins have been forgiven because she has shown great love."

I trust we won't omit the last verses of today's gospel - the ones which talk about the women "cured of evil spirits and infirmities" who are about to accompany Jesus on his classic journey to Jerusalem and who "provided for him (and the Twelve) out of their resources." St. Louis University's late Scripture scholar, Fr. Frank Cleary, often addressed the historical Jesus' exceptional relationship with women. Frank believed this Galilean carpenter accepted women for who they were, not for how they were categorized, pigeonholed or used by men. For the first time in many of their lives they encountered a man who looked at them as important individuals in themselves. They would do anything for such a person.

Given the evidence, I suspect our church might still be on the ground floor of understanding and practicing biblical relationships.

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JUNE 23, 2013: TWELFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Zechariah 12:10-11; 13:1 Galatians 3:26-29 Luke 9:18-24

Today's Galatians passage is by far one of the most important pericopes in all our Christian Scriptures. Paul reminds his community, "For those who have clothed themselves in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor freeperson, there is not male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

To understand what the Apostle is trying to convey, we must appreciate two things which he took for granted. First, whenever in his letters he speaks about the "Christ," he's referring to the risen Jesus, not the historical Jesus. Second, he presumes we know the difference between resurrection and resuscitation.

We have nothing written by anyone who personally knew the Jewish Jesus who lived and ministered in Palestine between 6 BCE and 30 CE. Our sacred Christian authors experienced only the risen Jesus: the Christ present and working in the communities for whom they wrote. (At one point, Paul, our earliest Christian writer, actually mentions he never knew "Jesus in the flesh.")

But the risen Jesus wasn't the historical Jesus who had simply come back to life after his passion and death. Paul traditionally describes the risen Jesus as a completely "new creation." In other words, "You ain't ever seen anything like this person." When Jesus brought Jairus' daughter, the widow of Nain's son, and his friend Lazarus back to life, he technically didn't raise them from the dead; he resuscitated them. For all practical purposes, they were still the same people they were before they died. Coming back from the dead didn't alter their social status, ethnic position or gender.

On the other hand, Paul reminds his Galatian community that when the Jewish, free, male Jesus came to life on Easter Sunday morning, he/she was just as much a slave as free, as much a Gentile as a Jew, as much a woman as a man. In this context, the Apostle is encouraging his readers to become like the risen Jesus, the person they daily experience. The best way to do this is to get rid of the distinctions which stand out and mark non-Christian communities. If we're other Christs, we're all one; we're all equal.

As Luke assures his gospel church, we "save" our lives by constantly giving those lives in service to others. Dying and rising in our own lives is essential if we're determined to imitate Jesus' dying and rising. The only difference is that we, unlike the historical Jesus, don't have to wait three days "to be raised." It happens the instant we give ourselves to those around us.

Scholars have no idea to whom Zephaniah is referring when he speaks about "him whom they have pierced." But since the prophet also seems to believe this anonymous person's death became a "fountain to purify from sin and uncleanness," it's easy to see how some early followers of Jesus could apply these verses to Jesus. Dying is simply an essential part of achieving a fulfilled life.

Yet, according to the faith of our Christian sacred authors, those who strive to become other Christs don't die by giving up desserts for Lent or meat on Fridays. We die by constantly breaking down the barriers which separate one person from another. If we contend that we're just to imitate the historical Jesus, then Christianity must be limited to free, Jewish men (under the age of 30.) But if we're actually to "put on" the risen Christ, then our faith and imitation is limited only by the distinctions we mistakenly try to place on a new creation, distinctions which the historical Jesus destroyed by his death ... and resurrection.