

JULY 14, 2013: FIFTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Deuteronomy 30:10-14 Colossians 1:15-20 Luke 10:25-37

One of the most difficult things we encounter in our lives of faith is taking the "other worldly" things we learn about and putting them into "this world."

The author of today's Deuteronomy passage confronted that very problem. That seems to be why he created this well-known instruction for Moses. "For the command that I enjoin on you today is not too mysterious and remote for you. It is not up in the sky, that you should say, 'Who will go up in the sky and get it for us and tell us of it that we may carry it out?' Nor is it across the sea that you should say, 'Who will cross the sea to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may carry it out?' No, it is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts; you have only to carry it out."

That's the problem: how do we make God's plan a part of our everyday lives?

As a disciple of Paul, the unknown author of Colossians is deeply rooted in the Apostle's theology that all who imitate the risen Jesus become part of the body of the risen Jesus. "He (Jesus)," the writer reminds his community, "is the head of the body, the church." What we do, he does; what he does, we do. This "image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" is an essential part of all we do here on earth.

What is it that we should be doing? The answer is simple and to the point: reconciling all things for him; bringing all people together as one in his name.

Sounds great in the abstract. Sort of like being told, "Love your neighbor!" The problems start, as we hear in today's gospel, when someone has the audacity to ask, "And who is my neighbor?"

In his challenging response, Luke's Jesus couldn't be more specific and more problematic. The neighbor to the Jew mugged and left for dead alongside the Jericho/Jerusalem road isn't the priest or Levite. This super-religious pair doesn't dare even touch the poor soul. If he's dead, or if they just come in contact with his bloody body, they've made themselves "unclean:" unable to participate in the sacred rituals around which their life revolves. No wonder they "passed by on the opposite side."

The most unexpected, despised person of the historical Jesus' day and age fulfills the role of neighbor. The Samaritan doesn't have to worry about not being able to perform temple rituals. He's forbidden, under pain of death, to even go into the temple! Because their Jewish ancestors intermarried with Gentiles during the 8th century BCE Assyrian Exile, all Samaritans were regarded as unclean. They were "half-breeds," unworthy of the name Jew.

Years ago, I'd torment my freshman religion classes with a hypothetical moral case. "You're on your way to Mass on Sunday - last Mass you can possibly attend - when you come upon an accident. If you stop, you could be of help, but you'd either miss Mass or come so late you'd commit a mortal sin. What would you do?"

The majority of my students (after eight years of Catholic education) usually replied, "I'd go to Mass." A few with sensitive consciences promised to pray for the injured as they went by. And a couple promised to leave Mass at communion and go back to see if they could help.

Somehow it's just too difficult for a lot of us to break through our liturgical regulations and actually love our neighbor in the concrete.

If you're ever in a serious accident, better pray an atheist happens by.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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FOSIL, BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222

JULY 21, 2013: SIXTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Genesis 18:l-10a Colossians 1:24-28 Luke 10:38-42

Though it's not "good form" to begin a biblical commentary by mentioning what a text doesn't say, it might be necessary to do so in the case of today's gospel pericope.

Our well-known Martha/Mary story wasn't created by Luke to highlight the superiority of the "contemplative" life over the "active" life. Mary isn't the forerunner of contemplative, cloistered religious who've chosen a better way to live their faith than those Marthas who are immersed in the active ministry. No evangelist would have understood the distinction between those two lifestyles. Luke is simply telling his gospel community that, following Mary's example, even women can become active disciples of Jesus.

But even more than that, Luke is demonstrating what can happen when people practice one of Scripture's classic ways of demonstrating their commitment to God: hospitality.

As far back as Abraham and Sarah - the first Jews - people of faith were expected to be hospitable to strangers. In offering food, drink and rest to three travelers, this special couple discovers they're actually taking care of Yahweh. (The "three" certainly aren't the Trinity. Our Genesis author is simply saying no one human depiction of Yahweh can encompass all of God's otherness; like children, when drawing pictures of their parents, always make them larger than the other people they depict to show their importance in their lives, our sacred authors also "expand" Yahweh.)

Biblical writers are convinced that no one can welcome strangers into their lives without surfacing things they've never before noticed or experienced. A generous act also brings blessings and changes to the actor. In the case of Abraham and Sarah, they're going to become parents. The child for whom they longed for years is now just nine months away.

In the case of Martha and Mary, an act of hospitality to an itinerant preacher on his way to Jerusalem brings about a total change in the direction of their lives. Martha's chided for not being able to see beyond people's expectations of her; Mary's praised for stepping outside her accepted gender role and actually opening the door to the possibility of becoming another Christ. Had the sisters waited for someone else to step up and care for this Galilean carpenter, their lives would no doubt have been smothered in mediocrity. When they opened their home to Jesus, they also opened themselves to experiencing a brand new life.

Along the same line, the follower of Paul who composed Colossians reflects today on what happened when the church opened its doors to 99% of the human race.

As far as we can tell, first generation Christians evangelized only Jews. After all, their mentor, Jesus, was a Jew who instigated a Jewish reform. Why would Gentiles be interested in a Jewish movement? But the writer's mentor, Paul, not only was able to experience the risen Jesus even in those who were outside the "true" faith, but eventually came to realize that God actually wanted "the riches of his glory" to be made known to these Gentiles. The risen Jesus could be embedded in them just as much as he/she was embedded in Jews who had committed themselves to imitating his dying and rising. By opening the door to Gentiles, as Gentiles, Paul and his followers began to understand their faith and their ministry from a totally new perspective.

Yet, as our author states, openness is always accompanied by suffering and affliction. Among other hardships, we'll have to struggle with those who contend we should keep our doors shut and let well enough alone. Opening doors to those who are different will certainly cause pain. Just ask the Boy Scouts.

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