

NOVEMBER 3, 2013: THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Wisdom 11:22-12:2 II Thessalonians 1:11-2:2 Luke 19:1-10

One of my favorite *Peanuts* cartoon strips starts with Linus making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Suddenly he notices his hands. Coming out of the kitchen he encounters his sister. "Lucy," he enthusiastically says, "look at these hands! One day they could be the hands of a terrific surgeon, or a world-renowned inventor, or a great scientist." Lucy looks up and simply says, "Those hands have jelly all over them."

Sometimes we're so concentrated on the future that we overlook the present.

A generation or so after Paul's death, some of his followers are still focused on Jesus' Second Coming, ignoring their responsibility to "... bring to fulfillment every good purpose and every effort of faith, that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him" Instead of carrying on Jesus' ministry, they spend their days discussing the latest rumors about the time and place of his Parousia. No wonder the disciple of Paul responsible for II Thessalonians begins this pericope with the simple statement: "We always pray for you"....

Our sacred authors, though deeply invested in the future, can only deal with the here and now which is at the heart of their readers' lives. The here and now is worth experiencing because, as today's Wisdom writer states, "Your (Yahweh's) imperishable spirit is in all things." God's life-giving presence gives meaning to everything we do and everyone we encounter, even in those situations in which we don't notice that presence.

This is especially true of the "bad people" who are a daily part of our lives. Our Wisdom writer sees their presence as proof Yahweh is a patient God. "You rebuke sinners little by little," he or she writes, "warn them and remind them of the sins they are committing, that they may abandon their wickedness and believe in you, O Yahweh!" In other words, God's patience guarantees they'll be in our lives for a long time.

Yet, at the same time, we have to work at making God's spirit evident in them right here and now, as Jesus does with Zacchaeus in today's gospel passage.

As I mentioned last week, first century CE Jewish tax collectors were the most despised sinners in Palestine. Not only did they separate people from their hard-earned money, they then turned most of that money over to the Roman occupation forces. Considering men of that day and age wore little or no underwear, Zacchaeus must have provided some comic relief by climbing that tree to see Jesus. Everyone could finally laugh at this hated individual and he couldn't do anything about it.

The only fly in their vengeful laughter ointment is Jesus. He alone goes beyond the situation and sees Yahweh's spirit in Zacchaeus, saying and doing something to make that spirit kick in. To everyone's amazement and in spite of their objections, this "holy man" invites himself to stay at the tax collector's home.

Coming into contact with someone who honestly seems concerned about him, and not about what the Romans force him to do, Zacchaeus experiences a real "metanoia:" a 180-degree change in his value system. "Half my possessions I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone, I shall repay it four times over."

"Salvation has come" only because Jesus saw something of God in Zacchaeus and pointed it out, not only to the crowd, but also to Zacchaeus.

We can hope and pray sinners will one day convert, but what are we doing right here and now to help them notice the divine dimension woven into their existence? Maybe we need a few more faith-filled Lucys around, forcing us to focus on the present.

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NOVEMBER 10, 2013: THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

II Maccabees 7:1-2,9-14 II Thessalonians 2:16-3:5 Luke 20:27-38

Many readers of Scripture have no concept of the evolution of faith contained in those writings. They simply presume the faith motivating the first chapters of Genesis is the same faith motivating the last chapters of Revelation. Nothing could be further from reality. Biblical faith constantly evolves the more we understand our experiences with God and God working in our lives.

In the beginning of the biblical period - tenth or eleventh century BCE - for instance, our sacred authors presumed Yahweh was simply one God among many gods. Only in the sixth century BCE, during the Babylonian Exile, do Jews begin to understand that Yahweh is the one and only God. In a parallel way, until about a hundred years before Jesus' birth, our inspired writers took for granted this life is the only life we'll ever experience. Everything began with our birth and ended with our death.

As a Pharisee, the historical Jesus was a believer in that new-fangled notion of an afterlife. He presumed those who formed a relationship with Yahweh in this life, would continue that relationship with Yahweh in a life beyond our physical deaths.

Not all Jews of Jesus' day and age accepted such a liberal theology, as we hear in today's gospel pericope. "Some Sadducees, those who deny there is a resurrection came forward . . ." They present Jesus with what could only be called a "smutty" example of the impossibility of an afterlife: a woman involved in multiple marriages. "At the resurrection," they demand to know, "whose wife will she be?"

Jesus' major argument for the woman's seven husbands not being an insurmountable eternal life dilemma revolves around what we're going to experience in that eternal life. It's not going to be just a simple Groundhog's Day rerun of this life. Those who continue their relationship with God into the next life are going to find themselves in a whole new existence. Just as our outside the womb existence is dramatically different from our fetal existence, so heaven will be dramatically different from this earthly existence. The Sadducees arguments against eternity are based on a false concept of eternity.

Of course, none of us, except for being confident we'll have a relationship with God, is certain about what eternity holds for us. The seven brothers in our II Maccabees reading are confident they'll continue to live after their martyrdom but no one says anything about the form that life will take. They're simply relying on" ... the hope God gives of being raised up by him"

Perhaps that's why the author of II Thessalonians encourages his readers to do the only thing which will determine whether they'll be part of a heavenly afterlife, or be left out in the cold (or heat). "May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the endurance of Christ." After all, God". . . loves us ... and encourages (our) hearts and strengthens them in every good deed and word."

Most of us, like the writer's mentor Paul, or the seven brothers, or Jesus, aren't going to experience a martyr's death - the most certain way of getting into heaven. We're going to have to go through a natural lifetime of building relationships with God and those around us. And as anyone who works at building relationships knows, we're never certain where those relationships are ultimately going to take us. We simply have faith that not building relationships results in a hell of an existence, something which, no matter how many times we've been married, we'd like to avoid.

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