

FEBRUARY 16, 2014: SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Sirach 15:15-20 I Corinthians 2:6-10 Matthew 5:17-37

Those who listen carefully to today's gospel reading from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount will probably have problems with Jesus' opening statement: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law, until all things have taken place. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments . . ." I presume most of us hearing these words can't name more than a dozen or two of the 613 Laws of Moses, much less worry about breaking any of them.

I often remind my students that our Scriptures weren't written for us. If they had, their authors would have written in English, not Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. Whenever we read the Bible, we're technically reading someone else's literature. To understand their literature, we must first understand them.

Family counselors often warn parents of teenagers never to start a sentence with, "When I was your age . . ." None of them ever were their children's age. They might have experienced the same number of years, but they never experienced those years in their children's environment.

The vast majority of Christians who read Matthew's gospel today have never experienced their faith in the environment the evangelist's readers experienced it. They were Jewish Christians, people who not only could click off the 613 Torah regulations, they kept them. Their males were circumcised, the family participated in synagogue services every Sabbath, and they never ordered a BLT from Sonic. They were the faith descendants of Jesus' original followers.

The late Fr. Raymond Brown constantly reminded us that the historical Jesus never intended to found a church as we know it. This first third of the first Christian century Galilean itinerant preacher was simply a reformer of Judaism. And, as a Pharisee, he was committed to keeping the Mosaic Laws. He would have agreed with the first line of today's Sirach reading: "If you choose you can keep the commandments, they will save you; if you trust in God, you too shall live . . ." But he had eventually reached a point in his relationship with Yahweh and those around him where he realized there was a deeper way of being saved, a more fulfilling way to live.

He clearly states his belief in our gospel pericope: "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." In this context, righteousness refers to our relationship with God and people; kingdom of God refers to surfacing God present and acting effectively in our everyday lives. As we hear during his encounter with the rich young man in Mark 10, Jesus presumes a good Jew can get into heaven by just keeping the 613 laws. But he wants his followers to experience the kind of righteousness he had experienced by adhering to those regulations in a deeper way than most of his fellow Jews did. He was convinced God's kingdom can only be surfaced by those who take those rules beyond their face value. That's why today we hear him constantly add on to "what was said" originally in the law.

Paul, in our I Corinthians passage, helps us reflect on Jesus' "wisdom" in demanding we relate to God and others in these new ways. No one can experience God's presence in the way Jesus did by just doing the bare minimum. As the Apostle discovered in his own life, there's depth to God that can only be surfaced by those who actually imitate Jesus' death and resurrection.

Roger Vermalen Karban

FEBRUARY 23, 2014: SEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Leviticus 19:1-2,17-18 I Corinthians 3:16-23 Matthew 5:38-48

Today's Leviticus passage contains one of the most important lines in all of Scripture: "Be holy, for I, Yahweh, your God, am holy!" It's so significant that Matthew's Jesus paraphrases it in a key point of his Sermon on the Mount: "Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect!"

The Hebrew word for holy - "kadosh" - simply means "other." Biblical writers were convinced that anything or anyone kadosh is different from other things or persons; they stand apart. So when our Leviticus author labels Yahweh kadosh, he's stating his belief that there's no one quite like Yahweh.

But even more significant than just calling Yahweh holy is the scriptural presupposition that those who follow Yahweh should also be holy. If that's true, then we logically have to ask how God expects us to demonstrate our "otherness."

Through the centuries many cultures have classified individuals suffering from severe mental illness as holy, simply because such people often say or do things that are quite other from the way the majority of people in those cultures say or do those things.

Though our sacred authors aren't encouraging us to become mentally ill, they do expect us to frequently live our lives at right angles to the way many people around us live their lives.

The Leviticus author, for instance, expects us to relate to our families, our neighbors and our countrymen in unique ways; especially when it comes to hatred, anger or revenge.

Matthew's Jesus agrees. But he carries our holy behavior one or two steps further, far beyond our families, neighbors and countrymen. After quoting our Leviticus command to love our neighbor, he also insists we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, just as in the prior verses he demands we offer no resistance to one who is evil, turn the other cheek, give to those who want to borrow, and even go an extra mile when we're forced to go only one mile.

Though I have no doubt if we actually did any of those things many people would presume we're mentally ill, Jesus' reason for commanding us to do so is airtight: that's how a holy, perfect God acts in our lives. We can't be holy unless we imitate God's holiness.

Paul's theology on our holy behavior certainly dovetails with Matthew's idea on the subject. The Apostle is convinced the "wise" among us will accuse us of being fools when they observe how we imitate Jesus' dying and rising. But he's also convinced that those who imitate Christ's behavior actually morph into other Christs. Like Jesus, we become God's temple, with God's Spirit dwelling in us. We don't just imitate God's holiness, we actually become as holy as the risen Jesus is holy. We no longer channel our faith through those who first brought us that faith; our holy behavior has caused us to relate to God directly.

I personally don't like being different. Though, for instance, I'm proud of being a priest, I rarely wear clerical garb. (When a friend once saw me in a Roman collar he immediately asked, "Is that a rental?") Like many of you, I prefer blending in with the crowd.

Yet at the same time I realize that if I'm to imitate Jesus I have to be holy. By refusing to stand out from others I might also be refusing to carry on Jesus' ministry. If we've freely committed to being other Christs, we'd better get used to being different, different in ways that'll change the world in which we live. If we continue to relate to people and do things in the same old, accepted ways, no one will even notice what our sacred authors mean by God's holiness.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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F.O.S.I.L., BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222