

JUNE 15, 2014: HOLY TRINITY
Exodus 34:4b-6, 8-9 II Corinthians 13:11-13 John 3:15-18

In one of my favorite Peanuts cartoon strips, Snoopy discovers his water bowl is empty. As he clamps it between his teeth and saunters over to the faucet he eventually realizes he has only one set of teeth. He can't simultaneously turn on the faucet and hold the bowl. He stands there for a while wondering what to do when the heavens open and a sudden cloudburst fills his bowl. Walking toward his dog house in the last frame, the bubble over his head simply reads, "I'm going to have to think about this one for a long time."

Our sacred authors presume we also experience things we can't explain, things we're destined to think about for a long time.

Those of us who were taught, "If you can't explain it, you don't know it," might find this difficult to accept. Yet when it comes to experiencing God in our lives, there's an awful lot we can't explain. Besides, once we do receive some sort of explanation of our experiences, we often stop reflecting on them. The late Anthony de Mello frequently reminded his audiences, "After you learn the name of the bird, you stop looking at the bird." There's nothing else to see, you know all about it.

It's very significant that Israel's God actually shared his name with his people. As we hear in today's Exodus passage, "Yahweh stood with Moses there and proclaimed his name, 'Yahweh.' Thus Yahweh passed before him and cried out, 'Yahweh, Yahweh, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity.'" How do we explain that name?

Our Exodus author mentioned in chapter 3's burning bush narrative, the name Yahweh means either "I am who am," or "I am who cause to be." In this case, God's name doesn't end reflection, it starts it. Just what does it mean to be or cause to be? We've been trying to figure that out for over 3,000 years.

In our sacred authors' Semitic culture, someone's name isn't just a bunch of letters which, put in the proper order, help us distinguish one individual from another. Someone's name actually stands for that person, revealing the characteristics which belong to that individual alone. Knowing someone's name gives you a certain amount of power over her or him in the same way that knowing someone's most intimate secrets gives you an advantage. That's why, a few centuries before Jesus' birth, some overly-pious Jews actually stopped using the name Yahweh and replaced it with Adonai – the Almighty or All Powerful One – a name we commonly translate simply as Lord.

In a well-known scene from the classic movie Lawrence of Arabia, Omar Sharif, who has just killed Peter O'Toole's desert guide, demands to know, "Englishman, what is your name?" Lawrence angrily replies, "My name is for my friends!" Rooted in Bedouin culture, Lawrence knew a Semite would never reveal his or her name to an enemy.

I presume no one broke into Yahweh's apartment one night, rifled his desk and found his name and Social Security number hidden in a side drawer under a bunch of papers. Yahweh freely gives us his/her name because Yahweh regards us as friends; friends who are trusted with something we could easily use against God. (Thus the commandment not to use the name Yahweh in vain.)

We Christians believe Jesus added to the meaning of that name by revealing the presence of a Son and a Holy Spirit. Yet not even these two divine persons end our understanding of who God is in our daily lives. Like our ancestors in the faith, we're continuing to experience a God whom we've yet to explain, a God who permits us to continually surface new dimensions of him/her. After all, we're friends.

JUNE 22, 2014: BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST
Deuteronomy 8:2-3. 14b-16a I Corinthians 10:16-17 John 6:51-58

Serious students of Scripture quickly learn to abandon their catechism frame of mind and approach our sacred writings from the viewpoint of Tevye, the hero of Fiddler on the Roof. Trained from youth to look at the truths of our faith with an “either/or” mindset, it’s difficult for many of us to shift to Tevye’s oft-repeated “But, on the other hand . . .” way of looking at things and people. For that traditional Jewish patriarch and philosopher, there’s almost always “another way,” another dimension of someone or something that continually surfaces.

In many situations, Scripture doesn’t provide us with answers; it provides us with options. Different authors present different theologies. The readings for today’s feast of Christ’s Body and Blood, for instance, offer us classic examples of “both/and” ways of looking at the Eucharist instead of the either/or catechism mentality with which we’re more familiar and comfortable.

We old-time Catholics feel reassured when we hear John’s Jesus proclaim, “My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.” We’re convinced that “whoever eats this bread will live forever.” It’s the risen Jesus’ actual body and blood, made present among us when the priest says those special words “This is my body; this is my blood” over the bread and wine during celebrations of the Lord’s Supper. Witnessing such an amazing transformation we’re expected to be silent, avoiding all distractions, focusing just on the transubstantiated elements before us. Only we Catholics – who have the true priesthood – are privy to such an otherworldly event. We were taught that Jesus isn’t present in that unique way in the Protestant church down the street, or in the “services” in which its members participate on Sunday mornings. Having Jesus’ body always in our tabernacles is one of the perks of being Catholic. Though it entails certain obligations - genuflections, tipping our hats or bowing our heads when we pass a church - these are small potatoes compared to the awesome privilege of Jesus actually being in our churches 24/7.

But on the other hand, writing at least 35 years before John composed his gospel, Paul of Tarsus approaches the Eucharist from a completely different direction. In the earliest biblical reference to the Breaking of Bread we possess, the Apostle directs his Corinthian community to look at “the cup of blessing” and “the bread that we break” as outward signs of our being the blood and body of the risen Christ. He doesn’t seem to be concerned, as John is, with comparing Yahweh’s feeding the Chosen People in the wilderness to Jesus feeding his followers with his body and blood.

At this point of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul’s simply interested in the unity of that particular church. That’s why he makes a comparison that most Catholics don’t even know exists. “Because the loaf of bread is one,” he writes, “we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.” (It’s obvious we don’t know the metaphor exists, or we’d immediately get rid of our small individual “hosts” and replace them with one big loaf.) According to Paul’s theology, looking at the consecrated bread and wine should force us to look at ourselves; to see everyone participating in the Eucharist as Christ’s body and blood.

I presume one of the reasons we as a church conveniently forgot about Paul’s “other hand” was because John’s Eucharistic theology creates less of a hassle to implement. As any pastor can testify, it’s far easier to have the community just zero in on Jesus in the bread and wine than on Jesus in the community; especially if one or two of those participating with us in the Lord’s Supper are Republicans.