

SEPTEMBER 7, 2014: TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ezekiel 33:7-9 Romans 13:8-10 Matthew 18:15-20

It's impossible to correctly understand the message our sacred authors are trying to convey without appreciating the necessity of community. These inspired writers couldn't have imagined a "rugged individualist" reading their writings. All their theologies revolve around our relations with others: God, and all who come into our lives.

As a prophet, for instance, Ezekiel's entire life is rooted in those others. Yahweh states, "You, son of man, I have appointed watchman for the house of Israel; when you hear me say anything, you shall warn them for me." The consequences of such an appointment could be dire. "If you do not speak out to dissuade the wicked from his way, the wicked shall die for his guilt, but I will hold you responsible for his death." How the prophet relates to people determines how Yahweh relates to him or her.

At least ten years before the first evangelist puts stylus to papyrus, Paul previews the gospel Jesus' best-known command in his letter to the church in Rome: "Whatever . . . commandments there may be are summed up in this saying, namely 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" It's important to remember that this command is originally found in the book of Leviticus; it's not unique to Paul, Jesus or Christianity. Yet it makes sense that the historical Jesus, as a reformer of Judaism, would have often quoted these specific Torah words. Prophetic reformers always take us back to the beginnings of our faith, back to ideas and concepts which once were at the heart of our faith, but through the centuries were eventually relegated to the periphery of our lives. Paul is committed to grounding his early Christian communities in the essentials of their faith. The message of both the historical Jesus, and the risen Jesus whom he imitates is rooted in the giving of ourselves to others.

That's why the gospel Jesus constantly zeroes in on our relations with one another, how those relationships are to be structured and what they can produce. In today's pericope Matthew's Jesus demands we confront evil in the community, not let it slide by. If there are problems between two people, they're first to "hash it out" between themselves. When that doesn't work, the situation's to be mediated by several others in the community. And if that fails, then the whole church is to be brought into the picture. (Of course, the whole (house) church back then would probably have consisted at most of only a couple dozen members.) Finally, as a last resort, they're to "treat the person as you would a Gentile or a tax collector," which, when we remember how the historical Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors, isn't the worst thing that could happen to someone.

But perhaps the most important part of today's passage are the lines which show how deeply the risen Jesus values the communities carrying on his ministry. They, like Peter, two chapters before, are empowered to "bind and loose:" to discern what rules and regulations are to be kept and which are to be discarded, something very significant for Matthew's Jewish/Christian community, a church committed to keeping the 613 Mosaic Laws.

Not only will God hear the prayers of such communities and care for their needs, but the risen Jesus himself/herself is present in those churches: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Could our emphasis on Jesus' presence in the Eucharistic bread and wine cause us to ignore Jesus' presence in the whole community? Our ancestors in the faith presumed that if we don't recognize him/her in one another, neither will we notice anything different about the bread and wine.

## SEPTEMBER 14, 2014: EXALTATION OF THE CROSS

Numbers 21:4b-9    Philippians 2:6-11    John 3:13-17

Early Christians wouldn't have understood our practice of displaying crucifixes depicting a suffering Jesus. It wasn't that they didn't believe Jesus suffered and died for us. But, when they wanted to create a symbol which conveyed the meaning of that unique event, putting a suffering Jesus on a cross didn't really do it. During the first four or five centuries of Christianity, a "*crux gemmata*," not a suffering Jesus cross, was the norm; they couldn't come up with a better way to express their belief in Jesus' death and resurrection. One need only Google the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century churches of Ravenna Italy to find multiple examples of this kind of crucifix.

In its most common form, a *crux gemmata* has the shape of the traditional cross, but instead of a suffering Jesus, the cross is covered with jewels. The cross is an obvious symbol of Jesus' suffering and death; the jewels convey our faith in his resurrection. The perfect Christian symbol, a *crux gemmata* is an outward sign of our belief that by dying with Jesus, we rise with Jesus. Years ago, when I showed some grade school students an example of a *crux gemmata*, a little girl raised her hand and spontaneously blurted out, "That's a happy cross!" It's against this background that we must hear today's three readings.

The irony of Yahweh's command to Moses in today's first reading to "make a seraph and mount it on a pole," and have the stricken people "look at it," revolves around the fact that such seraph snakes are actually killing the Chosen People. Contrary to popular wisdom, in this situation focusing on the instrument of death brings life, not death.

The first followers of Jesus could certainly testify to this reality. The very thing which brought death to Jesus also brought him life. John's Jesus, in instructing Nicodemus on what it means to be "reborn," refers back to this Numbers pericope. And he employs one of his double and triple meaning phrases – "lifted up" - to convey his meaning. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." Lifted up can easily have three meanings: simply to be raised up above others, to be exalted above others, or in an ancient middle-East context, a colloquial way of referring to crucifixion: he or she was lifted up on a cross. Which meaning does John expect us to take away? All of them! When Jesus is lifted up on Golgotha on Good Friday, he's literally put above others, and action which will cause his death. But it's also an action which brings about his exalted new life, the life he now shares with all his imitators.

The essential question for those who carry on Jesus' ministry is how are we to carry on his dying and rising? Only the most radical would encourage someone to actually be physically crucified.

As frequently happens, Paul supplies the answer. But he reverses John's lifted up image. For the Apostle, Jesus' road to divinity revolved around "going down," not going up. "He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave." He became one with those whom people in his day and age regarded as expendable. A real death even in our own day and age.

Women can testify how difficult it is to identify with men; men with women. Straights can find it rough to put themselves in the place of gays: gays have the same problem putting themselves in the place of straights. In the midst of this, it's essential to know that one way Jesus found life was to become one with all of us.

Maybe it would help if we lobbied for more *crux gemmatas* in our churches.