

SEPTEMBER 21, 2014: TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 55:6-9 Philippians 1:20c-24, 27a Matthew 20:1-15a

I was always taught that if you can't define something, you don't know it. Often my grade and high school teachers would benignly smile at those students who claimed, "I know it, but I can't put it into words," then immediately declare their response, "Wrong!" Much later I learned that if the "something" we were discussing revolved around experiences of God working in our lives, the teacher would have been forced to declare, "Correct!" How does someone put such experiences into words?

Years ago Fr. David Tracy, now professor emeritus of theology at the University of Chicago, once blew my mind with a lecture entitled *The Limits of Theological Language*. The well-known theologian demonstrated how near impossible it is to put our relationship with God into words that other people can understand. In such situations we're dealing with something very personal and very unique. That's why our sacred authors frequently had to resort to contradictions to get their points across. Tracy's prime example: Jesus' insistence in Mark 8 that those who work on saving their lives will lose them; only those who lose their lives will save them.

A classic contradiction is also Deutero-Isaiah's concern in today's first reading. He begins the passage with the consoling words, "Seek Yahweh while he may be found, call him while he is near." But then quickly quotes Yahweh's warning, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways . . . As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts." Theologians frequently refer to this as someone simultaneously having an experience of God's immanence and God's transcendence. Is the God we encounter close to us or far away? The prophet answers, "Yes!" Not even an inspired author can find a way to express those moments in a simple declarative sentence that doesn't contain contradictions.

Paul follows suit in our Philippians pericope. Should he be praying for a long life or an immediate death? On one hand, "If I go on living in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me." But on the other hand, "I long to depart this life and be with Christ, for that is far better for me." The Apostle's ministry is filled with such contradictions, contradictions which only arise because of his relationship with the risen Jesus, present in those around him and also a force beyond those around him.

Matthew's Jesus brings up a personal contradiction for the community who originally heard this gospel: Jewish/Christians, descendants of Yahweh's faithful followers, people who for over 1,200 years had followed all the 613 rules and regulations of the Sinai covenant, the logical recipients of the reform which the historical Jesus preached. But now, in the late 70s, they're forced to deal with a disturbing phenomenon: non-Jews being accepted into the Christian community without any obligation to keep those laws. Their males aren't even expected to be circumcised!

With no logical answer for this unforeseen development, the evangelist can only fall back on God's generosity. Just as a vineyard owner – in pre-union days – can pay his workers whatever he wishes, so God grants these late-arriving Gentiles the same benefits given to the Jews who "bore the day's burden and the heat." It's only consoling to hear that the last will be first and the first will be last" when we're in the last-to-first category.

A theological "mystery" isn't just a concept that we can't understand, it's a tension in which we find ourselves because we actually attempt to relate to God in our lives. If we don't encounter at least a half-dozen of those unexplainable contradictions every day, we might not have a biblical faith.

SEPTEMBER 28, 2014: TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ezekiel 18:25-28 Philippians 2:1-11 Matthew 21:28-32

Growing up Catholic, I once thought I had no need to convert. I simply believed that in order to get into heaven all I had to do was to keep on doing what I had already been doing all my life, just doing it a little more intently as I got older.

Then I began studying Scripture.

I initially discovered that rarely did our sacred authors concern themselves with getting into heaven. They, like Mark's Jesus in chapter 10 presumed that if we followed the commandments and kept our moral noses clean, we'd one day inherit "eternal life." These inspired writers – and the historical Jesus - were primarily concerned with helping us live a fulfilled life right here and now. From their own experiences they were convinced that to pull that off, we'd have to commit ourselves to frequent "conversions."

Of course, as Ezekiel points out, conversions can go both ways. One can certainly turn from evil to good; but the reverse is also possible. According to this 6th century BCE prophet's no-after-life theology, whether we live a long, fulfilled life or a short, frustrating life is determined by the choices for good or bad which we make during that life. Though it might not seem "fair" to some, God always permits us to change direction.

Encouraging his Christian community in Philippi to change their value systems and begin to "regard others as more important than yourselves," Paul reminds them of the most important conversion in their history of salvation: that of Jesus of Nazareth. No wonder the second half of this passage is always read on Palm Sunday, the day on which we remember Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, an event which has dire consequences. Because of a specific conversion at one point in his life, this Galilean carpenter will have only five more days to live.

Whether it was a conversion traditionally understood as Jesus leaving his divinity behind and becoming human, or has recently been interpreted, his refusing to fall back on being made, as all humans, in God's image and likeness and identifying with the lowest of people – slaves – it certainly brought about a drastic change in the direction of his existence. If one follows the latter interpretation, Paul sees that conversion to becoming one with the least of us as the triggering device for the human Jesus becoming God. "Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name (Yahweh) which is above every name." Conversions always come with consequences.

Jesus thankfully agrees with Ezekiel. It's never too late to convert. Though his gospel example of the two sons is easy to remember, it makes a point some of us don't like to admit: we're never tied down to our past choices. The risen Jesus always expects and empowers us to change. We can't excuse our lack of conversion to things which happened years ago. "Because of that, I'm now this way." It's invaluable to know why we are "this way," but that can never be an excuse for our continuing to be this way. If "tax collectors and prostitutes" can change their life's direction, why can't we?

The question is, "Convert to what?" Matthew's Jesus speaks about righteousness: the biblical way of describing the correct way of relating to God and those around us. Paul referred to those relationships as "emptying ourselves" enough to become one with those others, to imitate the risen Jesus who, as he reminded the Galatians, is neither Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. As the theologian Michael Crosby once stated, "It took the church about fifty years to accomplish the first, 1800 years the second, and we're still working on the third." We've only just begun to convert.