

OCTOBER 4TH, 2015: TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Genesis 2:18-24 Hebrews 2:9-11 Mark 10:2-18

Biblical morality revolves around relationships. That's why today's three readings are so significant.

As Christians we stand in awe of the relationship Jesus of Nazareth has with us. The author of the letter to the Hebrews couldn't have described it any better: "He 'for a little while' was made 'lower than the angels,' that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. . . . Therefore, he is not ashamed to call (us) brothers and sisters." We're important enough to die for.

Yet even before Jesus appears in history, our sacred authors were deeply concerned with how we relate to one another. The Yahwistic writer of Genesis, for instance, active almost 3,000 years ago, wasn't afraid to take on the culture of her own day and age when she passed on her well-known chapter 2 myth of the creation of woman.

In the author's day and age, women were not only regarded as unequal to men, they were often looked upon as being sub-human. One need only check ancient Middle Eastern creation myths to see the belief that men were often formed from a different material than women.

But before the author gets to women, she must take care of animals.

We know from pre-historic European cave art that bestiality was certainly practiced in the ancient world. That seems to be why the sacred author begins this particular myth by stating, "None (of the wild animals) proved to be the suitable partner for the man." That suitable partner had to be someone who is "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." In other words, made from the same stuff man's made from.

That radical belief also becomes the author's "etiological" reason behind intercourse. Because man and woman were originally one, they'll engage in acts of intimacy which will again make them one. Quite a different relationship between men and women than the Yahwistic writer's 1,000 BCE culture envisioned.

Mark's Jesus takes that relationship one giant step further. Though contemporary Jewish law permitted divorce under certain circumstances, he outlaws it completely. Falling back on the Yahwist's concept of oneness during intercourse, he contends such a oneness is a permanent condition; it can't be broken. Once one, always one.

Though modern psychologists often bring up situations when a personal decision to become one with another wasn't made with full understanding of what such a decision entails – and even church law provides dispensations from some unions – Jesus isn't talking about exceptions. He's simply stating a general principle: when two of his followers give their word to one another in such a serious, life-changing moment, that word is to be kept. Our imitation of Jesus' dying and rising in our everyday life changes how we relate to others in that everyday life, especially those with whom we've vowed to be one.

It also changes how we relate to "insignificant" people in our lives, as Jesus' disciples discover at the end of our gospel pericope. Though they see the children as an avoidable aggravation, Jesus regards them as a sign of how his followers are to accept God's kingdom around them: with the openness with which a child accepts the daily happenings in his or her life. He then reinforces his belief by embracing and blessing them.

Normally when biblical people bless someone or something, they're not asking God to add something to the individual or object, they're simply thanking God for the blessing which that person or thing already brings to their lives, something his disciples hadn't noticed.

Perhaps we'd live more fulfilling lives if we, like Jesus, also looked upon our relationships as blessings, and not aggravations.

COPYRIGHT 2015 – ROGER VERMALEN KARBAN

OCTOBER 11TH, 2015: TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Wisdom 7:7-11 Hebrews 4:12-13 Mark 10:17-30

Some of us have been traditionally confused about the message the historical Jesus actually preached. Those who believe, for instance, that he primarily came to get us into heaven will have problems with today's gospel pericope. Listen carefully to the dialogue between Jesus and the rich young man.

The man begins the encounter by asking a question we've all asked one time or another: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" In other words, "What must I do to get to heaven?" As a good Pharisee, Jesus basically responds, "Keep the commandments."

When the man assures Jesus he's already done this, the Galilean carpenter looks at him lovingly and responds, "You're lacking in one thing." Obviously not lacking in one thing to get into heaven. Jesus has already assured him he's going to achieve that goal by keeping the commandments. He's lacking in something which will help him achieve fulfillment in this life right here and now, long before he inherits eternal life. "Go, sell what you have, give the money to the poor . . . then come, follow me."

As the man disappears into the distance, Jesus reflects on his refusal to take the life-changing step of discipleship. "How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God. It's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." A wealthy individual – as long as he or she insists on maintaining their wealth – has the chance of a snowball in hell of surfacing God working effectively in their everyday life. Putting people in the forefront of our lives, and relegating money and power to the background is an essential part of the "repentance" Jesus demands of his followers. No one can notice God present and working day by day without first doing it.

When his disciples point out that such a commitment is normally impossible for a wealthy person to make, Jesus assures them God will help him or her pull it off. Only with God's assistance can we reach the salvation – experiencing "God's kingdom" – which Jesus offers his followers.

As the late Marcus Borg emphasized in his classic book *Speaking Christian*, we've done a great disservice to the historical Jesus and his earliest followers by reducing his ministry to simply learning how to avoid hell and get into heaven. The famous Scripture scholar insisted that when Jesus originally spoke about "being saved," as he does above, he was referring to the quality of life he wanted his followers to experience right here and now, not the life we hope to receive after our physical deaths.

I presume the author of the Letter to the Hebrews would list Jesus' dialogue with the rich young man as one of those "living and effective" words of God. It's certainly "sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow . . ." Though we long to identify with the author of Wisdom in reaching that moment in our present lives when "all good things come to (us) in (Wisdom's) company, and countless riches at her hands," we have to pay a price to achieve such a state of existence. Like the sacred writer, we seriously have to want that kind of life. It's not something that'll come our way by accident.

It's important to remember Jesus' gospel promise that whatever we give up here and now, we'll eventually receive back in spades here and now. It's also important to remember that if the historical Jesus hadn't already had this experience, he wouldn't have been so anxious to share this living and effective word.

COPYRIGHT 2015 – ROGER VERMALEN KARBAN