

FEBRUARY 28TH, 2016: THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT
Exodus 3:1-8a, 13-15 I Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12 Luke 13:1-9

One of many insights I learned from Carroll Stuhlmueller had to do with today's first reading. The famous Scripture scholar once remarked that he didn't believe Yahweh had positioned an angel with binoculars along the Sinai road Moses was traveling, ready to signal another angel to "cue the bush" when Moses got close. Carroll was convinced that the bush always was burning. But no one, except Moses, had ever looked carefully enough at it to actually see its fire. To say the least, Moses was different from others around him.

The historical Jesus also expected his followers to be different. That's why, as in today's gospel pericope, he constantly calls upon them to "repent." The Greek word *metanoia* – repent – means more than just "I'm sorry I did it; I'll never do it again." In Scripture it refers to a 180 degree change in one's value system. What I once thought important, I now see as insignificant. What I once judged unimportant, I've now put at the center of my life. The Galilean carpenter demanded that the first step in imitating him was to adopt his value system: to see people and things as he saw them.

Among all the evangelists Luke seems to have regarded repentance as a gradual process. That seems to be why he made a huge part of his gospel a journey narrative. Just as his Jesus constantly is on the road to Jerusalem, where he dies and rises, so his followers are on their own roads to Jerusalem: that place and time in their lives where they likewise die and rise with him.

No doubt Luke enjoyed narrating the story of the patient gardener. Like that unbearing fig tree, a lot of his original readers also needed to be cultivated and fertilized so they'd experience a *metanoia* in the future. Luke is the one evangelist who constantly zeroes in on God's mercy. (Is it an accident that his gospel is one proclaimed during this "Year of Mercy?")

Unlike most religious teachers, Jesus wasn't overly concerned with just providing people with new information to store in their brains. His goal was to change the way his disciples' brains interpreted the information already there, and the information which was still to come. Just because significant things were happening to his followers and significant people were involved in their lives, there was no guarantee that their value systems were such to interpret them as significant.

Paul treats that problem in our I Corinthians passage. Nothing was more significant in the history of Judaism than the Exodus from Egypt. Yet as the Apostle notes, the majority of those who experienced that unique act of salvation never seemed to have appreciated its significance, just as some of his readers don't seem to be appreciating the significant things and people in their lives. "Whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall." Acquiring Jesus' value system is a life-long process. We never reach a point and time when our repentance no longer needs to evolve.

Moses only encountered Yahweh because only Moses had the proper frame of mind which enabled him to come face to face with the God of his ancestors. Of course, his particular frame of mind resulted in his receiving some heavy responsibilities. When one's value system changes, one's responsibilities also change. We begin to see needs and opportunities most people around us ignore. We simply look at people and situations with new eyes.

Perhaps that responsibility thing is the reason some of us walk by a lot of bushes in the course of our lives, and never notice the fire burning in the middle of them.

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MARCH 6TH, 2016: FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT
Joshua 5:9a, 10-12 II Corinthians 5:17-21 Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Today's readings dovetail with the *metanoia* message we surfaced in last weekend's readings, providing us with one of the outward signs of the challenging value system Jesus demands we acquire.

As we listen to today's reading from II Corinthians, it's clear Jesus' disciples were expected to carry on his ministry. Paul reminds his community: "We are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us." What an itinerant preacher from Galilee started in the first third of the first century CE, we're to continue, no matter in what century or part of the world we live.

The problem is most of us became familiar with our faith by memorizing catechism questions and answers, not by studying and acquiring the personality of Jesus of Nazareth. We were drilled in all the dos and don'ts of organized religion, regretfully ignoring the frame of mind of the person who first shared his faith with us, a frame of mind he demanded his followers make their own.

In some ways, Jesus probably would have nodded approval that our Joshua reading is part of today's liturgy. The sacred author rejoices that, after 40 years of wilderness wandering, the Israelites can finally stay in one place long enough to plant and harvest a crop. In a parallel way, the historical Jesus constantly reminded his followers that they were always going to reap what they had sown, prophetically pointing out the future implications of their present actions. In doing so, he revealed his own personality, conveying the value system he wanted his followers to acquire.

Nowhere is Jesus' personality better conveyed than in his parables, and today's story of the "prodigal father" is one of his best.

Often the evangelists give us the parable without noting the circumstances which triggered the parable, making for wide interpretations. Fortunately that's not the case with this parable. The triggering device is, "Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" At this point Jesus begins this well-known parable. (Amazingly, before the 1970 Vatican II-inspired reform of the lectionary, we never heard this parable proclaimed in a weekend liturgy!)

Because of the circumstances prompting the parable, the story must be seen from the perspective of the older brother. He hasn't done anything wrong; he's "served his father" faithfully through the years. Technically, once his younger sibling got his share of their father's estate, everything else the father owns belongs to him – including the "finest robe," the "ring on his finger," the "sandals on his feet," even the "fattened calf." His brother gave up everything when he received his "share of the estate."

Yet once the boy returns penniless and begging, their father treats him as though he still had the rights he'd relinquished when he stormed out the house. Every lawyer in town would jump at a chance to represent the older boy in a lawsuit against his father and brother. It's a black and white case.

Jesus obviously believes when we're dealing with repentant sinners, we're to throw the "book" out the window, not worrying even about the "rights" of the righteous. No matter the problems it creates, we're to lovingly concentrate on the comfort of the sinner, welcoming her or him back into the relationship they enjoyed before the sin. In dealing with God, we're dealing with a loving, forgiving parent, not with a system of unforgiving rules and regulations.

No wonder we concentrated so intently and so long on catechisms instead of Jesus' personality. We could get into a lot of trouble by actually acquiring his frame of mind.

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