

JUNE 26TH, 2016: THIRTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

I Kings 19:16b, 19-21 Galatians 5:1, 13-18 Luke 9; 51-62

No two biblical calls are exactly the same. Though they contain the same basic elements, each is just a little bit different. In today's first reading, for instance, Elijah permits Elisha to return home to kiss his mother and father goodbye, something Jesus forbids his prospective disciple to do in our gospel pericope. Perhaps that's why it's good to zero in on the elements of the calls that are the same, the elements which apply to everyone, no matter his or her historical situation.

In every biblical call, God (or Jesus) expects the person to change his or her basic focus. What they once thought important, they now relegate to the perimeter of their priorities; what they once kept on the periphery, they now put front and center. At the start of his public ministry, the gospel Jesus labels this turnabout "repentance:" metanoia in Greek. In his mind, it's an essential personality trait in anyone who would dare follow him; a 180 degree change in one's value system.

In the situation of receiving a "call," it includes a demand that one's relationship with Jesus be more important than other relationships – even those relationships we have with our parents. The classic passage on this topic is part of today's gospel. When he invites someone to "Follow me," the man replies, "Lord, let me go first and bury my father." Jesus stuns us with the response, "Let the dead bury their dead. But you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Scholars remind us that most probably the man isn't on his way to the local funeral home to make arrangements for his deceased father. That's simply not how people were buried in Jesus' day and age. Rather, he's telling Jesus, "I'll follow you, but because my father wouldn't understand such a drastic move, let me wait until he dies and I bury him. Then I'll follow you." That seems to be why he says, 'Let the dead bury their dead.' In other words, "Haven't you noticed that your father – by not being part of my reform of Judaism – is already dead? Let someone just as dead as he is bury him. Nothing, or no one – not even parents - should stop you from being truly alive."

Jesus presumes that just as we must eventually die physically to enter eternal life, so we must die right here and now to receive life right here and now. And the main way he expects us to die is to undergo a metanoia.

In just what does the life the risen Jesus offers us today consist? In our Galatians passage, Paul states his belief that it's a freedom we can't achieve any other way. "For freedom," the Apostle writes, "Christ set us free. . . . For you were called for freedom, brothers and sisters."

Yet because our basic metanoia revolves around focusing on the importance of others, we're never free to put others down or use them for our own purposes. On the contrary, we're called and expected "to serve one another through love." Other Christs simply can't go through life doing "what we want."

We're to be as free as the historical Jesus was free, free to give himself to those around him, no matter the consequences. Such freedom eventually enabled him to accept death for those others.

Perhaps many of us are willing to follow Jesus in certain areas of our daily lives; those areas which don't cost us very much. But few of us are willing to slaughter the yoke of oxen around which our peaceful lives revolve. We haven't quite yet achieved that kind of freedom.

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JULY 3RD, 2016: FOURTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 66:10-14c Galatians 6:14-18 Luke 10:1-12, 17-20

I presume Paul would have benefited from a class or two in anger control before he wrote his letter to the Galatians. It's an understatement to say he was uptight when he dictated it. He had personally evangelized the Galatian community, teaching them how to become other Christs by imitating Jesus' death and resurrection in their own lives. Only by giving themselves for others would they be transformed into the same new creation into which the risen Jesus had been transformed.

Yet in a short period of time, some of them – as former Jews - had reverted back to their old practice of finding salvation in keeping the 613 laws of Moses, symbolized by the men being circumcised. They found more security in that than in being crucified with Jesus. Paul was so infuriated by their behavior that a chapter before today's pericope, he angrily writes, "Would that those who are upsetting you might also castrate themselves!" (Somehow the church has never found a liturgical setting for this particular passage.)

Using himself as an example, the Apostle encourages people just to look at him and see the damage to his body that his dying with Jesus has brought about. (Scholars believe his "marks of Jesus" have nothing to do with the later phenomenon of individuals receiving the "stigmata.") Paul's been scourged and beaten because of his imitation of Jesus, not because of his keeping the Mosaic regulations. Though he's endured great physical pain, he's convinced there's also a huge amount of psychological pain in discipleship. That seems to be what he means when he speaks about "the world being crucified" to him.

That's precisely the kind of pain Third Isaiah is presuming when he talks about "rejoicing with Jerusalem." Among other things, the prophet is trying to stimulate his community to simply leave Babylon and return to the Jewish capital. The problem is that when he's preaching these words, Jerusalem is in ruins, wiped off the face of the earth by the Babylonians over 60 or 70 years before. These formerly exiled Israelites not only have to return, they also have to rebuild. After one glance at the destroyed city, most decided to go back to Babylon. They found more peace and security in a foreign land than in rebuilding their native land.

Obviously we must go beyond the here and now and have a vision of what can be if we're true disciples. Living by such a vision entails a real psychological death; something not only many Israelites, but also many Galatians were unwilling to endure.

As we hear in today's gospel passage, giving oneself over to the vision of Jesus frequently causes rejection. Luke's Jesus is not just predicting what's going to happen when his followers try to evangelize others, like all gospel writers, Luke is also reflecting on what already happened to some of the "missionaries" in his own community. He wants to make certain they don't get down just because they were often rejected. No matter how their message was received, God is still among us working effectively in our daily lives. God's presence doesn't depend on people recognizing it. Whether proclaimers of Jesus' word succeed or fail, as long as they keep working to make the risen Jesus' vision a reality in this world, their names are "written in heaven." According to Luke's Jesus, that's the only thing that matters.

Obviously a lot of Catholics again accepted Jesus' vision after Vatican II. And a lot of Catholics eventually abandoned that vision for the sake of their own security. Thank goodness we have a pope who's calling us to return to that vision, no matter the cost.

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