

JULY 24TH, SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Genesis 18:20-32 Colossians 2:12-14 Luke 11:1-13

Some years ago when I was commenting on this set of readings I had a friendly disagreement with the editor of one of the diocesan papers carrying my articles. She strongly objected to my talking about Abraham “haggling” with Yahweh, believing that term bordered on anti-Semitic language. She encouraged me to use a word like barter or negotiate instead.

I immediately called a rabbi friend, asking his opinion on the matter. He assured me, “Roger, there’s nothing wrong in speaking about a Jew haggling. We’re not only known for it, we’re proud of it.”

That’s why the Genesis author included this narrative in her Sodom and Gomorrah story. If it’s a characteristic for which Jews are proud, then Abraham, the ancestor of all Jews must have had it in spades.

Though no scholar takes this haggling between Yahweh and Abraham literally, the writer not only created this passage to demonstrate the latter’s negotiating prowess, but also to show his unique relationship with Yahweh. As theologically simplistic as it might sound to us today, the Yahwistic author is telling us God is someone you can bargain with – as long as you’ve given yourself over to God.

In some sense, Luke’s Jesus is telling us something similar in our gospel pericope. It seems God, like the besieged friend, has a breaking point. Find it, and you’ll get what you want. Yet, listen carefully to what Jesus says you’re going to get. It won’t be a lot of “stuff.” Rather, “. . . The Father in heaven (will) give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.” In other words, if we ask for the Holy Spirit, we’re certain to receive the Holy Spirit, no strings attached.

As we’ve seen in the past, Luke, more than any other evangelist, is convinced the Holy Spirit is an essential element in our becoming other Christs. In his mind, how would we know how to carry on Jesus’ ministry without that Spirit pointing us in the right direction? At this point in the second half of the first century CE, the Christian community, following the historical Jesus’ mindset, had not yet locked itself into a hierarchical structure. It functioned as the Body of Christ because of its deep relationships with the risen Jesus and with one another, not because of any clerical prerogatives. As Paul once reminded his Corinthian community, the Spirit not only gifts each member of the community with all the talents that community needs, it also helps them integrate those gifts for the good of the community.

Of course, as the Pauline disciple who wrote Colossians believes, the relationship we have with the risen Jesus – who gives us his Spirit - revolves around our determination to die and rise with him. “You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him”

I don’t worry a lot about the rising. Jesus will take care of that. But I do spend a lot of time mulling over the dying. How am I to accomplish that today? That is where the Spirit kicks in.

Once upon a time I, along with many other Catholics, thought the only way to die was to ignore the Spirit working in my life and simply give myself over to the will of those exercising authority over me. Things certainly got more complicated when I started studying Scripture. Like our sacred authors, I began to realize my relationships with God, the risen Jesus, and the Holy Spirit took precedence over my relationship with the institution. At that point, I also began to do a lot of haggling. Just wish I were as good at it as Abraham.

Many of us don't realize how today's well-known Ecclesiastes passage contradicts the writings of other sacred authors. Those who composed our Hebrew Scriptures usually challenge Qoheleth's belief that "All things are vanity!" Knowing nothing of an afterlife – as we know it – until shortly before Jesus' birth, most of them looked upon wealth as Yahweh's right here and now reward for being good. They believed if you kept your nose clean, doing what Yahweh commanded, Yahweh would grant you a long life and take good care of you during that life.

Qoheleth, on the other hand, doesn't see any sense in spending a lifetime acquiring wealth. He's observed that someone who hasn't "labored over it" will eventually inherit it. "For what profit comes to someone from all the toil and anxiety of heart with which he/she has labored under the sun? All their days sorrow and grief is their occupation . . ."

How are we supposed to deal with these biblical contradictions?

In some sense we're invited to spend our money and take our pick. The same theology doesn't run from Genesis to Revelation. Our ancestors in the faith were convinced there are many implications – often contradictory implications - to our following Yahweh or the risen Jesus. The Scriptures they saved and collected provide us with a bunch of them.

Yet at the same time, a common theme runs through all our sacred writings: people of faith are constantly trying to discover what God wants of them.

In today's gospel passage, Luke's Jesus tells us what God doesn't want: a senseless accumulation of wealth. Following Qoheleth, he warns his followers that the wealth they acquire here isn't going to follow them into eternity. If they're smart, they'll work at storing up real "treasure:" the things that matter to God, the things which are transferable from this life to the next.

The Pauline disciple who authored Colossians couldn't agree more. ". . . Seek what is above," he writes, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Think what is above, not of what is on earth." He's convinced that if we've died with Christ we're already operating in the "above." That means we must not only sidestep all the evils this earth offers, but also put on a "new self." We must actually become other Christs.

Following the insights of his mentor, the writer is convinced the first step in this transformation is to recognize the risen Christ in everyone around us. Quite a task! Being human, we first have to overcome all the barriers this earth has built between one person and another. "There is not Greek and Jew," he reminds us, "circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all and in all."

No wonder there are different theologies in the Christian Scriptures. There's simply no one way to recognize that divine dimension in everyone. How do we prepare ourselves to experience that uniqueness? It isn't just a matter of telling our minds to do so.

It takes time to pull that off. It doesn't happen instantly. Different people are at different stages of that recognition. The American Georgetown University Jesuits, for instance, were still owning and selling slaves in 1838, based on the belief that legitimate slaves – individuals created by God as slaves – were "ontologically different" from non-slaves. It took another generation and then some for all Christians to realize that theology didn't hold water.

Today some still struggle with recognizing the risen Jesus in gays, lesbians and transgendered persons. Add that to the perennial problem: recognizing him/her in women. We've obviously got a long way to go, and a lot of contradictions still to explore.