

JANUARY 23, 2011: THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Isaiah 8:23-9:3 I Corinthians 1:10-13, 17 Matthew 4:12-23

All of us have experienced having our “button pushed.” Someone says or does something which causes us to lose it. Years ago while directing our diocesan diaconate program, a candidate simply had to ask, “When can I start wearing a Roman collar?” and I’d go bonkers. One of the reasons I became involved in that relatively new ministry was because of my problems with clericalism, symbolized, among other things, by distinctive clerical dress. I’d hoped these new deacons would follow the teaching of Jesus and avoid any signs which would support a biblical-forbidden Christian caste system.

Paul experienced a situation in his communities which also pushed his button. The Apostle had a passion for unity in the churches he founded. Nothing set him off quicker than surfacing divisions among Jesus’ followers.

He presumes all Christians make up the body of the risen Jesus. As other Christs each plays a unique role in carrying on the work of Jesus. Yet as different as we are, the Spirit unites all the body’s members into one entity. When someone creates divisions, the body can’t do what the Spirit intends it to do. Though one, not everyone has the same gifts or the same experiences. In Paul’s Corinth, not everyone entered the Christian community in the same way, or was baptized by the same person.

The latter is creating divisions. “Each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas.’” Many Pauline scholars contend that the last statement (“I belong to Christ!”) is actually the Apostle’s way of saying we owe allegiance to the risen Jesus, and no one else.

It’s no accident that Paul immediately refers to “emptying the cross of Christ of its meaning.” Creating unity in any Christian community can only be achieved if each member is willing to mirror Jesus’ death in his or her relations with everyone else in that community. Dying with Jesus, in the biblical sense, has nothing to do with fasting or performing physical acts of penance. It simply revolves around accepting everyone in the community as equal - but unique - members of the body of Christ.

We know from the gospel call-narratives that Jesus expects his followers to make their relations with others their main sign of discipleship. In today’s Matthew pericope we hear this expressly stated. “Come after me,” Jesus commands, “and I will make you fishers of people.” Though the two pairs of fishing brothers are giving up the tools of their trade, they’re not asked to give up the drive which sustained them in that profession. They’re simply promised that people - not fish - will now be their focus. (I presume had Jesus called hunters, they would become “hunters of people;” if shepherds, “shepherds of people.”) In no way are these first four disciples expected to “catch” people; they’re simply to put people, not fish, in the center of their lives.

This seems to be why Matthew precedes the call with Jesus’ proclamation, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” The historical Jesus’ primary goal doesn’t seem to be getting people into heaven, but helping them perceive God working in the lives right here and now. (Mark’s rich young man passage shows the difference between just getting into heaven and achieving the 180 degree change in one’s value system necessary to enter the “kingdom of God” or “kingdom of heaven” long before we physically die.)

No wonder Matthew refers to Isaiah’s oracle about people in Galilee seeing “a great light.” Responding “Yes!” to Jesus’ call takes away lots of gloom. But it also means we have to die to our former values before we can surface him/her alive in our daily lives. If we don’t die enough to become one with those around us, we’ll have to endure this gloomy environment until we actually do pass through those pearly gates to experience God’s presence.

JANUARY 30, 2011: FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13 I Corinthians 1:26-31 Matthew 5:1-12a

I'd much rather speak than write. I've no problem standing in front of large groups and talking about Scripture. I look forward to such occasions. On the other hand, I frequently look for any excuse to put off writing on the same topics. If I didn't have deadlines for these articles, I'd probably produce very few.

I think I know the source of my aversion to writing: I can't see my audience. When I speak I can see peoples' faces. I know who they are; I can see their reactions. I have no idea who's reading this commentary right now. Years ago during a Sunday dinner with my father, I was floored when he objected to a reference to him in that week's article. "You read my articles?" I asked in amazement. "Every one," he responded. "How else would I know if the pastor used your stuff in his homily this morning?" It never occurred to me that my own father was in my audience.

One of the good side-effects of my being diagnosed with lymphoma two and a half years ago was the huge number of letters, notes and emails I received with your good wishes and prayers for my recovery. (I'm glad to report that, as of my last PET-scan, I'm still in remission.) But all that correspondence helped me give a face to you who are reading these words. It's made my actual writing much easier

Our sacred authors never had my "audience problem." They knew exactly for whom they were writing.

When Zephaniah's disciples put his spoken words into a written format, they presumed their audience would be the same as their mentor's: a very small part of 7th-century BCE Israel. Though most biblical prophets probably began their ministries believing everyone would hear their words and quickly carry them out, eventually they realized Yahweh had drastically reduced their audience. "I will leave as a remnant in your midst, a people humble and lowly, who shall take refuge in the name of Yahweh: the remnant of Israel."

Paul begins his first letter to the Corinthians by reminding his audience of its pedigree. If they think they're special, he points out who they were before the risen Jesus entered their lives. "Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many of noble birth. Rather, God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise. . . the weak. . . to shame the strong. . . the lowly and despised. . . , those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something, so that no human being might boast before God."

The Apostle is convinced that whatever happens in our life of faith is worthless if we forget that God alone has achieved it for our benefit. We haven't pulled it off by ourselves.

But on the other hand, we're a very unique people. Once we enter into that "kingdom of God," everything around us is different. We simply don't look at things, happenings, and people in the same way we did before.

Matthew writes for those who share this out-of-the-ordinary experience. His Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with a recognition of that reality. That's why he singles out the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the clean of heart, the peacemakers, and persecuted. Matthew writes for these kinds of people. Only they will understand the wisdom contained in the next three chapters. Others will judge Jesus' words to be sheer nonsense.

When we hear Scripture, we're always listening to someone else's literature. Zephaniah, Paul and Matthew didn't originally write for us. (Else they would have written in English!) On the other hand, our faith joins us to the sacred writer's original audiences. Only such people can understand the true meaning of these words.

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