

FEBRUARY 6, 2011: FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 58:7-10 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 Matthew 5:13-16

It's significant that today's gospel pericope comes immediately after last week's passage on the beatitudes. Both comprise Matthew's introduction to his well-known, but rarely-practiced Sermon on the Mount. Before Matthew's Jesus lays down the law, the evangelist wants his readers to appreciate their uniqueness.

Most people balk at giving themselves unselfishly to those around them, especially to those who don't deserve such generosity. Only special people will commit themselves to this special behavior. That's why Jesus reminds his followers of their unique dignity.

"You are the salt of the earth . . . the light of the world." No one could be more complimentary. Yet there's a catch. The compliment comes with a warning. "But what if salt goes flat?... People do not light a lamp then put it under a bushel basket." In each case, the good which salt and light offer to others can be dead-ended. Salt can become insipid; a light can be hidden. Jesus expects his salt and light-giving followers to continue in their commitment to his ministry.

Of course, to understand that ministry, one must continue reading the Sermon on the Mount. As we'll see in the next weeks, Jesus is quite demanding. In some sense, he wants his followers to go back to the morality preached by biblical prophets such as Third-Isaiah.

Though this immediate post-exilic prophet is focused on getting the once-exiled Israelites to leave the security of Babylon and commit themselves to rebuilding Jerusalem and its temple, he still feels it necessary to remind his audience of their basic covenant obligations to others, whether in Babylon or in Jerusalem.

"Share your bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and the homeless; clothe the naked when you see them, and do not turn you back on your own." Then, using the same metaphor Jesus would employ 500 years later, Third-Isaiah promises, "Your light shall break forth like the dawn. ... If you remove from your midst oppression, false accusations and malicious speech; if you bestow your bread on the hungry and satisfy the afflicted; then light will rise for you in the darkness, and the gloom shall become for you like midday."

In other words, by becoming a generous light shining in a selfish, dark world, you'll receive the life-giving light which Yahweh offers. Both Third-Isaiah and Jesus are centered on the same behavior; a behavior which demands constant dying and rising.

That's why Paul puts today's second reading at the beginning of his first letter to the Corinthian church. One of the reasons he writes this particular letter is because many in that community had developed a Christianity in which people expected to receive the life of Jesus without suffering the death of Jesus. The itinerant preacher from Capernaum never proclaimed such a message. "I determined," the Apostle writes, "that while I was with you I would speak of nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified."

He acknowledges that his "crucifying" message wasn't received with open arms by everyone. Yet it didn't alter the way he presented the faith. "When I came among you it was in weakness and fear, and with much trepidation. My message and my preaching had none of the persuasive force of wise argumentation, but the convincing power of the Spirit." Paul's demand that the Corinthians imitate Jesus' total self-giving made no sense to the majority of people. Only those who dared give themselves over to Jesus' Spirit at work in them could see the light in the midst of their dying, and become a light for others.

It takes only a little salt to give taste to food. It takes only a few, committed individuals to change the direction of our planet. But, of course, if those few don't realize their importance, nothing will ever change.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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FOSIL, BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222

FEBRUARY 13, 2011: SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Sirach 15:15-20 I Corinthians 2:6-10 Matthew 5:17-37

A tremendous change happens in biblical faith a century before Jesus' birth: Pharisees begin to believe in an afterlife. Before that, Yahweh's people limited their faith to this world. Though they scrupulously kept the 613 laws of Moses, they didn't do so to get into heaven, but to have a successful, fulfilled life here on earth.

When Sirach promises those who "keep the commandments" will be "saved," and those who "trust in God shall live," he's promising salvation and life right here and now. The author provides his readers with faith's fundamental option: "life and death, good and evil; whichever we choose shall be given us."

Though Jesus and his followers profess a faith which goes beyond this present world, they don't discard that part of their ancestors' faith which saw the value in this world. When the first television came into our home in 1949, we didn't throw out our radio.

Yet, through the centuries, lots of Christians did just that. We so focused on getting into heaven that we forgot about living a successful, fulfilled life here and now. Our seminary spiritual directors frequently reminded us of the well-known Cure of Ars legend. On his way to assume his pastoral duties at Ars, Jean Vianney gets lost. Meeting a young boy, the recently ordained priest offers a quid pro quo: "If you show me the way to Ars, I'll show you the way to heaven." That promise became a mantra for diocesan priests: our ministry should revolve around getting our people into heaven.

After studying and teaching the Christian Scriptures for almost half a century, I'm convinced neither the historical or risen Jesus would have defined his ministry in those terms. The itinerant preacher from Capernaum certainly was concerned with getting his followers into heaven, but he also was driven to help them appreciate the significance of this world, long before they stepped through the pearly gates.

We must always remember what motivates this part of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Some well-meaning Jewish parents had asked their "Christian" children, "What do you find in this Jesus from Nazareth that you don't find in our 'old-time religion?'" If you just keep the Mosaic laws, you'll eventually get into heaven. What does he offer that's different from that?"

They answered simply. "You're right about getting into heaven. But Jesus takes us beyond just the outward observance of our laws; he shows us how to experience the 'kingdom of heaven' right now." (As I often remind you, the biblical phrase "kingdom of heaven" or "kingdom of God" refers to God working effectively in our daily lives.) That's why Matthew's Jesus states, "Unless your righteousness (your relations with people and God) surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus makes certain his disciples know that 1940s hit, *Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better!* He demands we do more than just avoid being angry, or commit physical adultery, or swear false oaths. As he says at the beginning of today's pericope, he's not in the business of getting rid of rules and regulations; he wants his followers to go beyond what these laws externally command, to develop such deep relations with those around us that we surface his risen presence in all we meet, do and experience.

That insight leads us to reinterpret Paul's famous I Corinthian quote: "What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him, that God has rendered to us through the Spirit." What we humans have yet to see, hear, or imagine doesn't start the second after we die; it's possible to experience it long before our moment of death. We simply have to be willing to die to ourselves long before our physical death; the only way to acquire life here and in the future.

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