

MARCH 6, 2011: NINTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Deuteronomy 11:18,26-28.32 Romans 3:21-25,28 Matthew 7:21-27

I have no idea who created the proverb “The road to hell is paved with good intentions,” but he or she could have been one of today’s sacred authors. Both Deuteronomy’s Moses and Matthew’s Jesus deal with the phenomenon of people who know what God wants them to do, but who never get around to doing it.

We only have the book of Deuteronomy because its readers’ ancestors had experienced the Babylonian Exile - ancient Judaism’s equivalent of Pearl Harbor and 9/11 combined. Most Jews thought it could never happen. Even when the Northern kingdom of Israel was overrun by the Assyrians in 722 BCE, and a large percentage of its inhabitants were carted off to Nineveh, Judah and Jerusalem were spared. So when the Babylonians invaded more than a century later, people thought they once again would avoid destruction. Just as Yahweh had stopped Tiglath-pileser at Jerusalem’s gates in the 8th century, its inhabitants believed Yahweh would also defeat Nebuchadnezzar in the 6th century. The Chosen People were on a 20 game winning streak.

They were unprepared for the shock of 596 when the Babylonians actually captured Jerusalem; even more unprepared 10 years later when, after a failed revolt, Nebuchadnezzar’s army returned to finish the job. Jerusalem was destroyed, its temple turned into a pile of rubble, and all the influential and powerful Jewish leaders and craftsmen deported to Babylon to begin a more than 50 year exile. Things were never the same for Yahweh’s biblical people after that disastrous event.

How could such a catastrophe have happened? Had Yahweh deserted Yahweh’s people? The author of Deuteronomy came up with an answer: Yahweh’s people had deserted Yahweh.

That’s why Moses dramatically outlines the distinction between obeying and not obeying Yahweh’s commandments. Pre-exilic Jews were offered a blessing or a curse. Because they had refused to carry out God’s “statutes and decrees,” they were now suffering the curse of deportation.

Matthew’s Jesus ends his Sermon on the Mount with a parallel warning. He doesn’t threaten his people with exile; he’s more concerned with their missing the opportunity of “entering the kingdom of heaven:” experiencing God working in their daily lives. Jesus says something that Luke would later make the mantra of his two volume work. The perfect disciple not only listens to God’s word, he or she also carries it out.

“Not everyone,” Jesus observes, “who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father in heaven.”

Yet, as important as our actions are, they must be driven by the proper intentions. We must always know what God expects. That’s why Moses tells his people, “Bind them (the laws) at your wrist as a sign, and let them be a pendant on your forehead.” Though usually given as the biblical basis for “phylacteries,” this verse actually goes deeper than the practice of tying small boxes containing Torah regulations on one’s forearm and forehead. Yahweh’s will should be at the center of our lives, not just something external to those lives.

Paul agrees. He doesn’t know how we can be other Christs without imitating the actions of the first Christ. But he also knows the importance of first imitating the mentality of Christ. It’s that unique commitment which “justifies” us, even if we can’t carry out everything God commands. All Christians are in the same boat. Only when our minds mesh with Jesus’ mind can we be certain we’re doing what God wants us to do.

It should be clear to almost everyone that some who claim they’re acting in the name of God wouldn’t recognize God’s will, even if it bit them in some conspicuous part of their body.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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FOSIL, BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222

MARCH 13, 2011: FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT
Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7 Romans 5:12-19 Matthew 4:1-11

Only by knowing the last verse of Genesis 2 can we appreciate today's first reading. The Yahwistic author only tells us that our sinful first parents' "eyes were opened and they realized they were naked," because in that omitted verse she mentions that the newly created man and woman "were naked, but felt no shame." Their sin brought a drastic psychological change into their everyday life.

Back in the late 1960s, prompted by a series of scientific discoveries, Pope Paul VI convened a conference of experts to study the phenomenon of original sin. The traditional way of looking at original sin - a mark on one's soul passed down from parents to children - was beginning to create more questions than answers. Among other things, these Scripture scholars, anthropologists, scientists and theologians had to deal with the possibility that we might not have descended from just one set of original parents. A new term had recently been coined: "polygenesis" - the idea that the human race could have evolved at different times and places. Such a concept demanded we make a major adjustment to our way of treating original sin.

In the end, the conference participants recommended we regard original sin not so much as a mark on our souls as the sinful environment our ancestors bequeathed us; an environment which makes it impossible for each of us not to commit her or his original sin. Our first parents' sin wasn't so much something they did as something they didn't do. Because there were fewer humans "in the beginning," it would have been easier for them to have changed the "intellectual world" in which they lived: the way they and their fellow humans related. By not taking that step, they guaranteed we would be embedded in a sinful world.

Going back to our Genesis passage, the man and woman were just as naked before their sin as after. But somehow, sin changed their world, forcing them to look at their nakedness from a different perspective. What was once normal, now creates embarrassment.

Convinced Jesus alone reversed the process our first parents started, our Synoptic evangelists begin his public ministry with temptations. He refuses to cave in to the same temptations we presume overcame them - the temptations all humans face, those which create the atmosphere we face every day of our lives.

How did Matthew and Luke know Jesus' specific temptations? No one was in that wilderness except Jesus and Satan. The answer is simple: because Jesus became one with us, the writers presumed he experienced the same temptations we do. Each of us is inclined only to take care of our material needs; never going deeper than externals. We're constantly inclined to ignore the nitty gritty aspects of life and daydream about the attention-grabbing spectacular. Or we'd like to have power over others, no matter the cost.

What if we weren't fearful that people around us were giving into those three temptations? We'd certainly be more relaxed and open in our relations with others if we didn't have to worry about them taking advantage of us. This is the world Jesus expects us to create. We're not just to avoid sin; we're do to so much good that the environment we shape by our unique actions will also help others do good, not evil.

Those who think one person can't have an effect on the world in which we live haven't read today's Pauline pericope. Speaking of the effects of Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul states, "Just as through one transgression condemnation came upon all, so through one righteous act, acquittal and life came to all." Never forget that the Apostle presumes all followers of Jesus have become other Christs.

I can't imagine what kind of world we'll pass on to our descendents centuries from now if, through those centuries, each of us imitates the environment-changing life of Jesus of Nazareth.

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