

JUNE 19, 2011: HOLY TRINITY

Exodus 34:4b-6, 8-9 II Corinthians 13:11-13 John 3:16-18

After years of reflection, I'm convinced when some of us speak or think about God, we're really thinking or speaking about a concept, rather than a real person.

I presume our ancestors in the faith worried about us falling into such a trap. That's why they bent over theologically backward to prevent such an abomination from happening. Today's Exodus author, for instance, describes the Mt Sinai covenant-making ceremony in great detail. "Having come down in a cloud, Yahweh stood with Moses there and proclaimed his name, 'Yahweh.' Thus Yahweh passed before him and cried out, 'Yahweh, Yahweh, a manifest and glorious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity.'"

In biblical cultures, a person's name is only employed when one is trying to convey the personality of that particular individual, aspects of the person not shared with everyone.

There's a scene in the movie Lawrence of Arabian in which Omar Sharif not only rides up and puts a bullet between the eyes of Lawrence's desert guide, but then immediately demands to know, "Englishman, what is your name?"

Lawrence gives him the highest insult a Semite can deliver. "My name is for my friends!" In other words, "I'm not going to tell you anything about myself. I don't share who I am with my enemies."

Thankfully Yahweh has put all of us on his/her "friends' list." We're all invited to find out who Yahweh is.

It's no accident Sister Elizabeth Johnson entitled her recent, well-received book Quest for the Living God. She states in her introduction. "Living means the opposite of dead ... This appellation summons up a sense of the God who is full of energy and spirit, alive with design for liberation and healing, always approaching from the future to do something new . . . (It) evokes the realization that there is always more to divine Mystery than human beings can nail down. It prepares those who use it for astonishment."

Throughout my decades of teaching marriage courses, I consistently warned my students about reaching a point in their marriages in which they presume they'd learned everything there was to learn about their spouses. In that instant, meaningful relationships die. After that, we're just going through the gestures.

Jesus' first followers were never in danger of falling into that trap. In their writings we constantly hear the amazement which comes from discovering "new things" about God, especially things which appeared when they tried to imitate Jesus' dying and rising in their daily lives.

Paul refers to just a few of these insights in our II Corinthians pericope. He first gives God the title, "God of love and peace," then applies different attributes to the Father, Son and Spirit. "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Spirit be with all of you." Life (grace), love and togetherness (fellowship) are individual dimensions of God which the risen Jesus surfaces in the lives of his followers; parts of God's personality which he helps us discover.

John, conceiving of Jesus as God's word, presumes the living God is mirrored in the living, risen Jesus. If Jesus loves and saves, then God loves and saves. Believing in the name of the only Son of God parallels believing in the name of Yahweh.

Had our faith ancestors been content to repeat only "catechism concepts" of God, we wouldn't be celebrating today's feast of the Trinity. It took almost 300 years of Christians reflecting on their ever-changing experiences of God before participants in the 325 CE Council of Nicea came up with the insight of three persons in one God. It certainly wasn't there on Easter Sunday night.

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JUNE 26, 2011: THE BODY AND BLOOD CHRIST
Deuteronomy 8:2-3,14b-16a I Corinthians 10:16-17 John 6:51-58

Though both Paul and John talk about the "body of Christ" in today's readings, each approaches the concept from different directions.

Most of us, as Catholics, are more comfortable with John's theology than Paul's. From childhood we've been taught about his manna symbolism. On the other hand, we rarely hear (or practice) Paul's theology.

The Deuteronomy author sets the stage for John by reminding his community of Yahweh's care for them during the Exodus. "... Yahweh, your God,... directed all your journeying in the desert. . . He let you be afflicted with hunger, then fed you with manna, a food unknown to you and your ancestors, in order to show you that not by bread alone does one live, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of Yahweh."

This feeding image is custom-made for John's account of the institution of the Eucharist. Removing the institution from the Last Supper, he repositions it in the context of Jesus' miraculous feeding of the crowds. (Of course, in its Last Supper place, he inserts another "sacramental sign:" the foot washing.)

No one can doubt John's conviction that Jesus' body and blood is "true food and true drink." Nor can they doubt that our eating and drinking these elements will help us achieve eternal life. "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day."

Eternity is the point at which John's manna metaphor breaks down. The author of Deuteronomy knew nothing of an afterlife as we know it. For him, manna was just a help to eventually reach our earthly promised land. Like manna, the Eucharistic bread "... is the bread that comes down from heaven," but there's a big difference. "Unlike our ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever." Jesus feeding us now is a dramatic sign that Jesus will feed us for all eternity.

Paul, on the other hand, is much more concerned with the here and now. Though the Apostle still seems to be expecting Jesus' Second Coming to take place during his lifetime, he's worried about some of his communities splitting apart before that earth-changing event. Because unity is by far his constant focus, he envisions the Eucharist as a force which unites us on two levels.

First, "the cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?" Second, "the bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?"

It's not only essential that we constantly be one with the risen Jesus, but in order to carry out the ministry of Jesus, we also must be one with all those who make up the body of the risen Jesus. Just as, for John, Jesus' body and blood guarantee we'll experience an eternal oneness with Jesus, Paul is concerned that whenever we join with others in celebrating the Lord's Supper, we become one both the person we commemorate and with everyone doing the commemorating right here and now.

One outward sign of this unity is the form of the bread we employ for our meal. "Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of one loaf."

Paul would be appalled to discover we Catholics long ago discarded the practice of using one, big, messy loaf in favor of more manageable individual servings. On the other hand, I presume Paul would be even more appalled at the institutional divisions (clergy/laity) at play during our Eucharists than he would be worried about the type of bread we use. The latter run completely counter to Paul's vision of community.

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