

AUGUST 28, 2011: TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Jeremiah 20:7-9 Romans 12:1-2 Matthew 16:21-27

There's a good reason the "crux gemmata" (jeweled cross) quickly became the symbol for early Christian communities. This one object perfectly mirrored their experience of dying and rising with Jesus. The outline of the cross conveyed suffering and death; the jewels showed the resurrection and life such suffering and death brought to them.

My advice today is to forget the jewels. Our three sacred authors are zeroing in on the cross.

Whenever I teach Jeremiah 20, I always insist that anyone clinically depressed leave the room. The prophet's words could push him or her over the brink.

Translators face a dilemma when they deal with the first line of today's passage. Some say Yahweh "duped" Jeremiah; others he "tricked" or "deluded" him. But in other contexts, the Hebrew word they're trying to translate usually refers to "rape;" hardly a pious concept in a pious book like the Bible, especially when it refers to Yahweh's actions in the life of a prophet. Yet that seems to be exactly how Jeremiah looks at the experience of Yahweh entering his life. I, like most of you were warned by my parents about getting into cars with strangers. Jeremiah's telling us here, that, against his parents warning, he got into Yahweh's car. "You were too strong for me, you triumphed!"

Things were never the same after Jeremiah agreed to be Yahweh's prophet. "The word of Yahweh has brought me derision and reproach all the day." Even worse, he eventually discovers that trying to give up prophesying is akin to retiring from the mafia. "I say to myself, I will not mention him. I will speak in his name no more. But then it becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it."

So crushed by the pain of being Yahweh's mouthpiece, by the end of the chapter Jeremiah demands to know why someone didn't kill him the second he was born. One couldn't be more depressed.

Peter senses that some of what Jeremiah experienced will also be part of his life if he commits to following Jesus. It only takes a mention of Jesus' suffering in today's gospel pericope for this early Christian leader to rebuke him. "God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you!" Actually he's saying, "No such thing should ever happen to me!"

In his oft-quoted command "Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus seems to be employing Satan not so much as a name for the devil, but in its original Hebrew meaning of an obstacle in someone's path. The belief that one can be a follower of Jesus without enduring Jesus' suffering is the obstacle to carrying out Jesus' ministry.

In Jesus' plan to change the world, one must first be willing to lose one's life to eventually save one's life. "No pain, no gain!" makes sense in such a plan. But, as we'll see in two future predictions of Jesus' suffering and death, Christian pain doesn't consist in actually being nailed to a cross, enduring self-flagellation, or even wearing a hair shirt, but in giving ourselves generously to others, as the historical Jesus did. As painful as it is, we're expected to live our lives as God does, not as other human beings do.

Paul conveys the same concept. "Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect."

Though many of us don't like to admit it, if we're serious about being disciples of God, we often identify with Jeremiah. We might couch our fears and frustrations in different words, but down deep, we're glad Jeremiah said what he said. It saves us from getting into a lot of trouble for saying it.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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SEPTEMBER 4, 2011: TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ezekiel 33:7-9 Romans 13:8-10 Matthew 18:15-20

I recently received several emails from friends containing the same wire-service story about sayings people falsely attribute to Scripture. The biblical expert whose research prompted the story debunked everything from "Spare the rod, spoil the child!" to "A stitch in time saves nine!" But when it came to "God helps those who help themselves!" he made a very perceptive comment. "Anyone who knows the Bible would never claim such a statement is in there. It runs completely counter to everything the Bible teaches."

One need go no further than today's three readings to prove his point.

The authors of both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures practice a faith which drives them to relate to others. They follow a God who's not only worried about those who cannot help themselves, but who also expects people of faith to share in that concern.

The command Yahweh gives Ezekiel in our first reading has become a classic formulation of our mutual frame of mind. "You, son of man, I have appointed watchman for the house of Israel; when you hear me say anything, you shall warn them for me."

No doubt there were many days the prophet would have preferred to stay home, curl up with a good scroll and let his fellow exiled Israelites figure out Yahweh's will by themselves. After all, when he did deliver God's word, he wasn't accepted with open arms. His concern for others created lots of problems for him.

Fortunately the fear of being hassled for carrying out God's will doesn't stop Paul from making certain the Christian community in Rome knows exactly what God wants them to do. "Brothers and sisters," he writes, "owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law."

Because the Apostle imitates the dying and rising Jesus in his daily life, he, like Jesus, goes to the book of Leviticus to surface a quote which summarizes his other-centered lifestyle: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The reason is clear. "Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law."

It's within that context of love and concern that Matthew's Jesus tells us to get involved in a situation many of us would prefer to avoid. "If your brother or sister sins against you, go and tell them their fault between you and them alone." It's clear from what follows that the reason behind such a direct approach to evil isn't just a tool for promoting good communication between two individuals. It's also meant to guarantee that Christian communities avoid becoming dysfunctional entities. If the sinful individual refuses to alter his or her behavior, the whole church must be brought into the picture.

As part of a hierarchal structured institution, some of us might be amazed at the value Matthew's Jesus gives both to the whole church and to its individual members. All of us (not just our leaders) are empowered to "bind and loose," and the joint prayer of just two of us "shall be granted by (Jesus') heavenly Father."

But perhaps the most stunning statement about the community's importance is saved for last: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them!"

No wonder we're called to be concerned for all, especially the helpless. Our sacred authors presume each person is important enough to merit our concern. By relating with and to them we surface the risen Jesus.

It's a shame the whole church wasn't brought into the sexual abuse issue from the very beginning. Had everyone been permitted and expected to show concern for those helpless individuals who had been so badly hurt, both the pain and the scandal would have been drastically reduced.

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