

JULY 22, 2012: SIXTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
 Jeremiah 23:1-6 Ephesians 2:13-18 Mark 6:30-34

Since World War II, Scripture scholars have looked at gospels from a completely different perspective. Before the mid-1940s they zeroed in on individual passages, trying to surface how each pericope developed and evolved in the early Christian community. But since then, students of the Bible have also begun to concentrate on how the evangelists integrated those individual passages into a unified work.

This is quite similar to what movie critics do. They often focus on a specific scene, studying how it was filmed, directed and acted. But eventually they have to comment on how that particular scene fits into the whole movie, judging how it helps convey the overall message the director's trying to get across.

Once scholars of our four gospels began to employ this methodology – called “redaction” criticism – a whole new biblical world opened. They started to appreciate the theology each evangelist was sharing with his community. The four were more than just collectors of early Christian traditions. Each molded Jesus' sayings and narratives into a unique pattern. Today students of Scripture rarely use the phrases “Jesus said this or did that.” It's been replaced with “Mark's Jesus or John's Jesus said this or did that.” Each evangelist provides us with a different theological picture of Jesus.

It's significant that when our American bishops were given the next to last draft of the Catholic Catechism to critique, their number one objection was that it wasn't “scriptural.” Among other things, they realized it didn't take into consideration the various theologies of the sacred authors. The catechism treated the gospels, for instance, as Jesus biographies, not as Jesus theologies, permitting its authors to arrange gospel passages into the theology they, not the evangelists, wanted to convey.

Sadly, our bishops' objection was brushed aside.

But neither were those who chose our liturgical readings in the late 60s familiar with redaction criticism, else what's going to happen next week could never have occurred. Every three years, in the middle of summer, we suddenly shift from Mark's narrative of the miraculous feeding to John's account – a biblical “No! No!” Though both seem to narrate the same event, they employ different theologies in their narratives.

Beginning next Sunday, we'll treat John's theology for the next five weeks. But since today's Marcan passage is an intro to his first bread miracle, we'll look at his.

Like many of our sacred authors, Mark's concerned with the qualities of a good leader. As we hear in our Jeremiah reading, leadership in faith communities has always been a problem, in this case leading the prophet to look to the indefinite future for the arrival of a perfect leader. Mark, on the other hand, looks to the here and now. In his mind, the perfect leader, Jesus, has already arrived. What aspects of his leadership should Christian leaders be imitating? Jesus' communities should never be like “sheep without a shepherd.”

In Mark's theology – clearly demonstrated in his first bread miracle – a faith leader should be a catalyst, creating situations in which Christians can meet the needs of others, even though they initially think they're powerless to meet those needs. In Mark's account, unlike John's, Jesus doesn't feed the people, his disciples – after much protest – carry out that work. He's simply the instigator, pointing out an ability they didn't realize they had until they actually did it.

Though the Pauline disciple who wrote Ephesians emphasizes the unifying aspect of leadership, Mark's insights can't be ignored or underestimated. He's telling his community to surface leaders who aren't threatened by the power of the people they lead. If they are, the needs of the community will never be met.

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JULY 29, 2012: SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR II

Kings 4:42-44 Ephesians 4:1-6 John 6:1-15

As I mentioned last week, each of the four evangelists has his own unique theology. That's why we have four gospels, not just one. In some sense they write against someone (other evangelists) as well as write for someone (their communities.) John, for instance, wants his readers to concentrate on Jesus' divinity more than his humanity. That's one of the reasons he makes several changes in a story Mark first narrated more than 30 years before.

In Mark's chapter 6 account of the first bread miracle, Jesus simply forces his disciples to share the little food they've brought with everyone in the crowd. He only instigates and blesses; his disciples do the rest. But from the beginning, John's Jesus takes charge of the situation; initially calling attention to the impossibility of buying enough food for such a huge crowd and ending by personally distributing the boy's bread and fish.

We presume John's familiarity with today's II Kings reading, in which Elisha the prophet feeds a hundred people, is partially behind the peoples' remark, "This is truly the Prophet, the one who is to come into the world." Although, following John's belief that anything Judaism can do, Christianity can do better, his Jesus feeds more with less and is far beyond being just an ordinary prophet; he's the Prophet - a special Yahweh-sent person who will be the new Moses, liberating people from oppression.

Once fed, this particular crowd has the wrong idea about what this prophet should do and be. "Since Jesus knew they were going to come and carry him off to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain alone." Jesus is a different kind of liberator than they had in mind. They think of an external liberation; Jesus focuses on an internal liberation - a dimension which John will explore over the next couple of weeks.

Yet even though John puts a spotlight on the divine Jesus, the author of Ephesians reminds his readers that their actions are at the heart of Christian faith. "I . . . urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received with all humility and gentleness" The Pauline disciple who penned these words presumes each follower of the risen Jesus has received a personal call from him/her. No matter the importance of the divine Jesus, his disciples share in that importance by continuing his/her ministry.

But, agreeing with John, the writer presumes such importance differs from a "common," non-Christian definition of importance. We're accustomed to deferring to "important" people, putting them on pedestals, treating them with a respect ordinary people don't normally receive.

At odds with that definition, the Ephesians author encourages the other Christs in his community to " . . . bear with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

Important people in the Christian community constantly work at helping others discover their importance. Everyone in our communities is so important that we want to be one with each of them, just as Jesus, the Spirit and the Father are one with us.

Constantly maintaining such a vision of unity demands lots of hope: trust that with the risen Jesus' help we can pull it off. A personal divinely-inspired vision of oneness is more liberating than any change of political leadership. Just ask our sacred authors.

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