

MARCH 24, 2013: PALM SUNDAY Isaiah 50:4-7

Philippians 2:6-11 Luke 22:14-23:56

Hearing any of the four Passion Narratives, we're not so much to thank Jesus for dying for us as to thank him for showing us how to die. That's why our evangelists passed these stories on to us. The main task of a follower of Jesus is die and rise with him. Just one question: how do we accomplish the former?

As far as we can tell, no one in any of the biblical Christian communities was expected to be scourged, have nails hammered into his or her wrists and feet and be elevated on a cross for three (or six) hours. That's not what dying with Jesus means. That's why there's almost no mention of Jesus' physical suffering in any of the four narratives. (Notice that today Luke describes Jesus' actual crucifixion using just three words: ". . . they crucified him . . .") Instead of physical suffering, our evangelists stress Jesus' psychological suffering. They presumed few would ever suffer physically because of our being other Christs; but none of us could avoid suffering psychologically.

The gospel Jesus always taught that the action which brings about our dying and rising with him revolves around giving ourselves for others. How do we accomplish this? In part, each of the four Passion Narratives differs from the other three because each evangelist zeros in on different ways in which we're called to give ourselves. Yet, employing the example of Jesus' passion and death, all four are convinced our giving will entail a lot of psychological pain.

Luke's Jesus especially demonstrates such giving throughout his passion by a unique concern for others, even those involved in his death. Only in Luke, for instance, does Jesus replace the high priest servant's severed ear. (In the other three narratives the servant walks out of the garden with the ear in his hand.) Luke alone mentions that Jesus plaintively turned and looked at Peter after his denials, and that he told the weeping women not to worry about him, but to be concerned with the suffering they're going to endure. And two of the most memorable scenes in all four narratives were created by Luke: the good thief and Jesus' prayer as he's being nailed to the cross, "Forgive them, Father, they don't know what they're doing."

We'd logically expect Jesus to make others aware of how deeply he's suffering - especially after he's been declared innocent at least six times in Luke's narrative by three different people - yet in each of the above situations, he ignores his own pain and zeroed in on the pain of others. Can't image how much that cost him psychologically. Paul certainly had that other-directed characteristic of the suffering Jesus in mind when he reminded his Philippian community in the verse that precedes our liturgical selection, "Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus."

Perhaps that's why it's good to have Deutero-Isaiah's Third Song of the Suffering Servant as our first reading, especially the part in which the prophet states, "Morning after morning Yahweh opens my ear that I may hear." The authentic follower of Yahweh (or the risen Jesus) hits the floor every morning, listening or watching for the pain of others. Luke's Jesus teaches us that no matter how much we're personally suffering, we're still called to recognize and help alleviate the pain of others around us - even if some of those others are the very people causing our suffering.

This week, above all others, should be the place and time in which we most try to become other Christs, even if psychologically we'd rather give ourselves over to more rewarding projects. The life Jesus received only came after the many deaths he endured.

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MARCH 28, 2013: HOLY THURSDAY Exodus 12:1-8,11-14 I

Corinthians 11:23-26 John 13:1-15

Except for Holy Saturday, no night is more important to Christians than Holy Thursday: the night on which we commemorate the Lord's Supper. Once we own up to all the discrepancies in the five biblical accounts of that event, it's clear our sacred authors were concerned more with conveying the meaning of what Jesus said and did on that night than on giving us an exact blow by blow of what actually happened.

Because one of the three Last Supper traditions - Mark (copied by Matthew and Luke) - ties Jesus' final meal into the yearly Passover celebration, it's essential to understand the significance of that feast. As we hear in today's first reading, it commemorates the pivotal freeing event in all Jewish history: the Exodus from Egypt. If there were no Exodus, there'd be no freedom, no Jews, no Scriptures. Freedom is synonymous with being Yahweh's biblical people.

Though Paul and John don't revolve their Last Supper passages around the Exodus, they still contend that the actions and words of Jesus on that night are at the heart of Christian freedom.

Paul's well-known I Corinthians 11 Eucharistic passage was triggered by some in the Corinthian community who, by refusing to share their food and drink with the poor during their Eucharistic celebrations, were engaging in an action completely counter to the faith of Jesus. Though they listened to Jesus' words and drank from "the cup of the new covenant in my blood," they adamantly refused to "recognize the body." At this point, Paul's not talking about recognizing Jesus' body in the Eucharistic bread; he's concerned with recognizing the risen Jesus' body in the Christian community . . . especially, in this instance, in the poor.

One of Stan Musial's grandsons made an interesting observation during the baseball great's recent funeral. "My grandfather," he said, "always made nobodies feel like somebodies." Sadly, about twenty minutes later, his insightful comment was blatantly ignored when an "official" announcement was made concerning those in the community who would be permitted to receive communion and those who were to be excluded.

Paul presumed the Lord's Supper is the one place in which we can be liberated from the limits which our cultures, theologies and prejudices impose on us, the one action in which we can become completely one with everyone around us, the one moment in which everyone is transformed into somebody. That's why he ends today's passage with the powerful reminder, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes." We freely die with Jesus by accepting all who participate in the Lord's Supper as equals.

As Sister Sandra Schneiders pointed out in her famous thirty year old Catholic Biblical Quarterly article, when Jesus washes his disciples' feet during John's Last Supper pericope, he's not only a superior doing something for inferiors, he's a superior who's operating outside his "field of expertise:" he's not a professional foot-washer. You don't know what's going to happen when you give yourself to others in situations in which you're not in control. Some, like Peter, could refuse your giving, or complain you could have done better. Yet that's the example John's Jesus gives, the example he expects us to follow.

The historical Jesus, as a good Jew, wanted his disciples to be free. He was convinced they would attain their freedom, not by crossing a sea, but by freely giving themselves to others. The early church discovered their giving and their freedom were most intense when they became one - the body of Christ - during the Eucharist, an experience some of us have yet to attain during our celebrations of the Lord's Supper.

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