

OCTOBER 20, 2013: TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Exodus 17:8-13 II Timothy 3:14-4:2 Luke 18:1-8

We must hear today's first and third readings against the background of two stories in II Samuel 15 & 16; both narratives go to the heart of true religion.

For most people in the ancient world, religion was simply a system of special prayers and rubrics which, when employed correctly, guaranteed the gods or goddesses would grant your requests. Good religions supplied the tools to control the divinity.

But, as Walter Brueggemann pointed out in his classic book *In Man We Trust*, King David's "theologian" changed that concept. Fleeing from his son Absalom, David's twice given an opportunity to control Yahweh's actions in his life. In 15:24ff, the priests offer him a huge advantage over his rebellious son: possession of the Ark of the Covenant: the portable shrine in which Yahweh is present more than in any other place on earth. To everyone's amazement, David refuses their offer. Then, in 16:5ff he stops Abishai, his bodyguard, from killing the Benjaminite Shimai who's throwing stones and curses at him during his retreat. The stones he can duck, but according to 10th century BCE theology, Yahweh's forced to carry through on the curses unless the curser is killed.

Refusing to give in to that theology, the king uses words like "if and "perhaps" in both narratives when he refers to Yahweh's actions in his life. David's convinced that God's not controlled by special religious objects or words. Basing his reaction to the priests' offer and Shimai's curses on a new and improved theology, David tries to relate to Yahweh instead of attempting to control Yahweh. Once he does that, all the guarantees that organized religion provides are thrown out the window.

All of us can testify that there's always lots of ifs, perhaps, and maybes when we honestly try to relate - to give ourselves - to others. We never know exactly what the other person is going to do with what we give, and we certainly don't know how we're going to react to his or her reactions. It can get kind of messy at times.

Perhaps that is why some of us will enthusiastically latch on to the pre-Davidic theology in today's first reading. Just keep your hands raised and God will give you what you want. And some might even think the solution to having our needs met lies in the gospel widow's technique of continually hammering away until a "just decision" is made in our favor. Though Luke's Jesus encourages us to imitate the woman's persistence, he also adds one *caveat*: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

In other words, when this life as we know it is over, will it have been a success because we got all the stuff we ever prayed for, or because, through our faith, we developed a proper relationship with God, the person who always wants justice (proper relationships) for all people?

It might also be good to reflect on something the Pauline disciple responsible for II Timothy mentions in his letter. He talks about all Scripture being inspired by God and useful in various situations. When one is familiar with all Scripture, one quickly realizes we're dealing with different - sometimes contradictory - theologies: different ways of looking at God working in our lives. No one way fits everyone's needs and experiences. No doubt part of that theological diversity comes from the fact that we're expected to relate to God and not just try to control him/her. Since all relationships are different, all our theologies are also different.

Remember the good old days, when all we had to do was memorize the answers to catechism questions?

Roger Vermalen Karban

OCTOBER 27, 2013: THIRTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Sirach 35:12-14,16-18 II Timothy 4:6-8,16-18 Luke 18:9-14

Today's three readings perfectly dovetail with last week's.

Sirach sets the theme in the first sentence: "Yahweh is a God of justice, who knows no favorites." Since biblical justice revolves around having the proper relationships with God and one another, the author is saying, "Yahweh doesn't mechanically dominate and control us; Yahweh relates to us."

Of course, having a relating God creates some problems. Sirach mentions a couple. Yahweh's "not unduly partial to the weak, yet he hears the cry of the oppressed. Yahweh's not deaf to the wail of the orphan, nor to the widow when she pours out her complaint." Our God starts the judgment process with people, not with rules and regulations.

Jesus' well-known parable about the Publican and Pharisee was meant to convey the same message. The Pharisee falls into the category of "super-Jew." His life revolves around keeping the 613 Laws of Moses. The Publican, on the other hand, is a traitor to his country and Judaism itself. Breaking dozens of those 613 regulations, he makes his living working for the Roman occupation forces. Most probably he's standing "off at a distance" in the Jerusalem temple because, as a notorious sinner, the religious authorities regard him as they would a Gentile, relegated as all non-Jews to the outskirts of this holy place. There's no way he can boast of any religious accomplishments.

While the super-Jew can remind Yahweh that he fasts twice a week and pays tithes on his whole income, the sinner "... would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.'"

As with all parables, the "kicker" comes at the end. "I tell you, Jesus says, "the latter went home justified, not the former; for those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

As any married couple can testify, keeping rules and regulations can never build a relationship; only honesty about oneself and the other can even begin to pull that off. That takes a lifetime commitment.

Perhaps that's why the Pauline disciple responsible for II Timothy zeroes in on Paul's determination to go to his death constantly building a relationship with the risen Jesus. "I am already being poured out like a libation," the writer's mentor insists, "and the time of my departure is at hand. I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith."

Marcus Borg constantly insists in his book *Speaking Christian* that the original biblical meaning of belief has nothing to do with giving intellectual assent to rules and regulations or doctrines and dogmas. Belief revolves around "believing." Our sacred authors presume we believe or have faith in someone, not in something. The believing person simply gives himself or herself over to that someone in a loving way.

Since March I've been thanking God every day that we have a pope who insists we, as a church, go back to the biblical idea of belief. Day by day Francis has been working at helping us refocus our religious priorities. Experts in church history constantly remind us that within two or three centuries of Jesus' death and resurrection, especially after Constantine's 313 CE Edict of Milan, we Christians began to lose our focus on building a relationship with the risen Jesus and those on the outskirts of society with whom he expects his followers to relate. Rules gradually became more important than people; regulations more important than relationships.

I pray Francis' reform succeeds. It parallels the reform Jesus preached to first century Judaism.

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