

AUGUST 23RD, 2015: TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b Ephesians 5:21-32 John 6:60-69

One of the most fascinating aspects of studying Scripture critically is discovering the different theologies this collection of writings offers. Some of these theologies eventually made it into our catechisms; others are still there for the taking.

Because of their Semitic mindset, our sacred authors presumed that when anyone dared reflect on the implications of God working in their lives, he or she would consistently come up with both/and conclusions, something we modern Greek thinkers abhor. Having abandoned Semitic thought patterns almost 1,900 years ago, we're constantly striving for either/or answers to our faith questions. That's one of the reasons the majority of us prefer catechisms over Scripture. We don't enjoy having such important questions lead us to other questions.

In today's first reading, for instance, once the Israelites complete their 40 year trek through the wilderness, cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land, Joshua demands they stop their fence-straddling and choose between Yahweh and the other gods inhabiting Canaan. Though the people freely and unanimously decide "to serve Yahweh, for he is our God," they quickly discover there's no one way to render that service, nor just one way to experience Yahweh working in their lives. Their theologies evolve as their service and their experiences evolve. Explanations which worked last year, might not work this year. That's why there are at least four different – sometimes contradictory – theological sources in the Torah alone.

Such differences also carry over into the Christian Scriptures. In our second reading, the unknown author of Ephesians attempts to theologically explain the relationship between Christian married spouses, basing it on the relationship which the risen Jesus has with the church. Sadly, given the understanding of husband and wife's roles in his day and age, the writer identifies the man with Christ and the woman with the church. So he logically concludes, "Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord." It's no surprise that more perceptive theologians today, working from a different cultural understanding of the relationship between committed spouses, have developed theologies in which the wife isn't expected to be subordinate to anyone – even their husbands. What worked in the 1st century CE, doesn't have a chance of working in the 21st century CE. Times and theologies have changed.

But we hear one of the biggest changes in biblical Christian theology in today's gospel pericope. Though all Jesus' followers are convinced he gave us the Eucharist, our sacred authors employ different explanations to help us understand that gift.

Paul of Tarsus is the earliest theologian to deal with the Eucharist. In his oft-quoted I Corinthians 11 passage, he chides some in that particular community for not "recognizing the body." Their selfish behavior during celebrations of the Lord's Supper proves they're not experiencing the body of Christ in those participating in the celebration with them. Though the Corinthians presume the risen Jesus is in the bread and wine, not everyone presumes he/she is in those around them – especially the poor.

But by the end of the first century CE, John takes the focus off of the community and puts it on the Eucharistic bread and wine itself. Forty-five years after Paul, the test of a true Christian now revolves around seeing the bread and wine as the risen Jesus' real body and blood.

No wonder some of Jesus' "disciples no longer walked with him." Not everyone – even in John's community - bought into this new theology.

No wonder many later Christians did buy into it. It's certainly less demanding than Paul's insights. Little skin off my teeth if the risen Jesus is in the bread and wine; lots of skin off my teeth if he/she's in the person standing next to me.

Roger Vermaalen Karban

AUGUST 30TH, 2015: TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8 James 1:17-18, 21b, 22, 27 Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Even the most liberal Scripture scholars – convinced we can know almost nothing about the historical Jesus – admit there’s one thing about this early first century CE Palestinian carpenter that we do know for certain: he was a law-breaker.

Already back in chapter 2, Mark strings together a series of narratives in which Jesus’ (and his disciples’) law-breaking sets off confrontations with his law-abiding critics. So it shouldn’t surprise us that in chapter 7, Mark’s Jesus reaches a point in which he teaches that his followers don’t have to follow even the venerable and well-known Jewish dietary regulations. “Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person,” he points out. “But the things that come out from within are what defile.”

Since many of us don’t appreciate the historical Jesus’ Jewish background, we also don’t appreciate the importance of his skirting many of the rules and regulations at the heart of his religious practices. As we hear in today’s Deuteronomy reading, Moses couldn’t be clearer about the obligation assumed by all Israelites to keep every one of the commandments they agreed to at Mt. Sinai. “. . . You shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it. Observe them carefully” How could Jesus then, as a good Jew, not observe so many of them?

In the midst of his chapter 2 lawbreaking, he gives three reasons for his behavior: two make sense to almost anyone, a third creates problems for almost everyone. First, he’s not the first Jew to break laws. King David, for instance, was well-known for not being limited by religious rules and regulations. Second, as God, Jesus can dictate his own path in life, free from any legal restrictions. Third, people come first. Only after Yahweh created humans did laws come into existence.

This last reason was so controversial in the early church that when Matthew and Luke wrote their gospels a few years after Mark, they deliberately left it out though they had a copy of Mark’s gospel in front of them when they wrote theirs. Who’s to judge what’s for people’s good and what isn’t? Such reasoning opens up a can of worms which many prefer not to open.

Yet we presume the historical Jesus did open it. Not only as a good Jew, but also as a reformer of Judaism he knew his covenant responsibilities didn’t revolve around getting into heaven, but in experiencing as fulfilling a life as possible on this earth. He eventually came to the insight that an emphasis on keeping laws put the focus on the regulations and took it off the people those regulations originally were meant to help. He didn’t need an advanced degree in theology to point out that some who faithfully followed the laws were actually being hurt, not helped by them. In many situations, the reason the laws had been created was being dead-ended.

We’re grateful that the risen Jesus’ disciples followed his example and also changed their focus. The author of the letter of James demonstrates that turnabout in his classic line, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their afflictions and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” If we’re not caring for people, we’re not following God’s laws.

The upcoming second session of the Synod on the Family will certainly resurrect the first century Christian issue of law-keeping and law-breaking. We can only pray and trust that Pope Francis and the Synod participants will make Jesus’ third reason – as controversial as it is – their guide for keeping or changing some of our most venerable rules and regulations.

Roger Vermaalen Karban