

JULY 10TH, 2016: FIFTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Deuteronomy 30:10-14 Colossians 1:15-20 Luke 10:25-37

One of my favorite Peanuts quotes is Linus' offhand remark, "I love mankind . . . it's people I can't stand." I presume it became quite popular in the late 50s and early 60s because so many of us identified with the little guy. We can love things in the abstract, but when it comes down to loving them in the concrete we frequently find a half dozen reasons for suspending our love.

That's exactly the problem Luke's Jesus tackles in today's gospel pericope. It's not difficult to repeat his answer to the lawyer's question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" We're to demonstrate our love of God by loving our neighbor. On face value it's easy to understand. The kicker comes when the legal scholar follows his first question with another: "And who is my neighbor?"

Those who deal with the 613 Laws of Moses know that definitions of terms is essential to understanding those laws. For instance, when it comes to the commandment "You shall not commit adultery" we Christians presume that prohibition refers to having relations with anyone who's the spouse of another. Yet many Mosaic Law experts are convinced this commandment originally applied only to those who were having illicit relations with Jews. Similar relations with Gentiles weren't covered under this particular commandment.

It's interesting that Jesus doesn't provide this legal expert with a precise definition of neighbor; instead he tells him a story.

Most of us know about the historical animosity between Jews and Samaritans, but few of us appreciate the actions of the priest and Levite. When the two pass by on the opposite side of the road, they're not just refusing to get involved with a fellow Jew in need, they're actually forced to do so because of their religious obligations. Functionaries at the Jerusalem temple, they're forbidden to touch a dead body or even come into contact with blood. So, in this particular situation, this particular Jew doesn't fit their theological definition of a neighbor. He's more a temptation to sin for them than a concrete occasion to fulfill Yahweh's command in the book of Leviticus to love your neighbor. The Samaritan, on the other hand, isn't limited by their religious restrictions. He's forbidden – under pain of death – from even entering the temple!

Notice when Jesus asks, "Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim?" the lawyer doesn't say "the Samaritan." He simply replies, "The one who treated him with mercy."

As much as I hate to admit it, Jesus seems to be saying that if any of us ever find ourselves in dire straits, we'd better pray an atheist come by. "Religious persons" would probably have four or five reasons why, in this situation, they're absolved from helping us. Luke's Jesus couldn't be clearer: religious obligations can never excuse us from helping someone in need.

He agrees with the author of Deuteronomy who, in our first reading, reminds us that God's commandments are ensconced in our everyday lives. We don't have to look up to heaven to find out what God wants us to do; we simply have to look around us. God works in the concrete, not the abstract.

The Pauline disciple responsible for Colossians takes this concreteness one step further, expressing his belief that the human Jesus was actually the "image of the invisible God." Not the holy card image of Jesus, but the real image.

Along that line, historians remind us that no one over the age of 20 in Jesus' day and age had a full set of teeth. Since the historical Jesus was 30 when he died, I presume he fits Linus' definition of "people."

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JULY 17TH, 2016: SIXTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Genesis 18:1-10a Colossians 1:24-28 Luke 10:38-42

After I saw the movie High Noon at the age of 12, I found myself for a least a day and a half trying to walk like Gary Cooper. I probably wasn't alone. Movie heroes normally engender imitation. That's why the most popular motion picture hero of all time is To Kill a Mockingbird's Atticus Finch. Almost everyone would like to imitate this fictitious hero's unprejudiced personality.

The imitation of heroes didn't start with movies. Our sacred authors utilized this concept thousands of years ago. It's behind today and next week's Genesis readings. The writer depicts Abraham and Sarah as ideal Jews, in both passages demonstrating characteristics which good Israelites are or should be noted for.

Today's characteristic is hospitality.

Though the three strangers come at a most inappropriate time – siesta – Abraham doesn't wait for them to ask for hospitality, he rushes over and begs them to “let” him take care of them. Then, with Sarah's help, he “picks out a tender, choice steer” and prepares it for them with all the side dishes. (By the way, no Scripture scholar believes these three are the Trinity. They're simply Yahweh in human form, a unique entity that no one human being can represent.)

In a world in which there were no hotels or restaurants as we know them today, travelers depended on people's hospitality for survival. Our biblical writer reasons that if Israelites are Yahweh's Chosen People, then Israelites must mirror Yahweh's concern and care for all people. She's proud to say the first two Jews mirror that care and concern.

The sacred author even tells us about the reward Abraham and Sarah receive for their generous hospitality. “One of (the strangers) said, ‘I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah will then have a son.’” Sarah's barrenness is over. Yahweh will demonstrate the same generosity with this couple as they demonstrated for the three travelers.

This isn't the only time in Scripture that hospitality is given an unexpected reward. Our gospel pericope provides us with another classic example.

We can never forget that Luke revolves much of his gospel around a journey Jesus and his disciples take from Galilee to Jerusalem. They, like the three Genesis visitors, are also travelers, frequently dependent on people's hospitality. In today's passage, the sisters Martha and Mary offer Jesus a meal as he's passing through their village. He not only accepts, he spends the time while the food's being prepared in teaching his good news.

Then, when Martha complains that her sister is listening to his teaching instead of helping with the cooking, he rewards them for their hospitality by gifting them and all women with something which, in their culture, only men were expected to possess: the ability to engage in the “better part.” They, like men, could be full disciples, fully listening to and carrying out Jesus' teaching. For Luke, no longer were there “women and men's activities.” This evangelist, more than the other three could be labeled a radical feminist.

One really doesn't know what to expect when one offers hospitality to others. And, for the author of Colossians, that offering is ongoing. It never stops. “Filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, the church” is always part of every Christian's ministry.

Just as Abraham, Sarah, Martha and Mary discovered a totally new direction in their lives when they gave themselves to others, so we, following their example have no idea what to expect when we imitate their example. No wonder our ancestors in the faith found life so exciting.

Maybe we don't have the right heroes if we're living boring lives today.

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