

JULY 1<sup>ST</sup>, 2018: THIRTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR  
Wisdom 1:13-15; 2:23-24    II Corinthians 8:7, 9, 13-15    Mark 5:21-43

I can't stress enough the importance of today's Wisdom reading. It contains a biblical smoking gun, something for which scholars searched for centuries.

The idea of an afterlife didn't come into Jewish theology until a century before Jesus' birth. Before then, this present life was the only life we could expect. Everything had to happen between our physical birth and death. Then, almost out of nowhere, Pharisees begin to teach that, if we keep our noses clean, we can live eternally with Yahweh. Though most Jews eventually accepted some form of that belief, the big question was, "Where did they get such a faith-changing insight?" Yahweh doesn't seem to have simply appeared to someone and let them in on the secret.

Originally most scholars reasoned these particular Pharisees must have somehow come in contact with Greek thinkers who believed we have an immaterial soul, a part of us that never decays. It'll live on forever, even after our physical deaths. The only problem with that explanation was that no one could find an actual contact between Jews and Greeks. There was no smoking gun.

Then, about thirty years ago, some experts, like the late Roland Murphy, began to realize the weapon is right in front of us, in Wisdom 1:15: "For justice is undying."

Since *justice* is the biblical way of referring to the proper relationships we have with God and those around us, it appears the Pharisees figured because Yahweh is immortal, anyone in a just relationship with Yahweh will also be immortal. If God wants to keep their relationship going after death, they'll live forever.

Certainly more meaningful to root immortality in a union with God instead of an "accident" of nature. That also seems why the prophets and Jesus of Nazareth so frequently stress our tie-in with God and the people around us. Those relations guarantee eternity.

Paul is deeply convinced that interacting with the people we encounter in our lives is how we work out our salvation, but only if we do so in a giving relationship. He reminds his Corinthian community that we're simply to imitate Jesus' oneness with ourselves. "Though he was rich," the Apostle writes, "for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." By giving life to others, we gain eternal life.

Mark's Jesus does precisely that in today's gospel pericope, resuscitating Jairus' daughter and healing the woman with the uterine bleeding. Notice in doing the latter, the evangelist remarks Jesus was ". . . aware that power had gone out of him." Often we imagine the historical Jesus simply snapped his fingers and good things happened. We don't realize those good things drained Jesus. He was weakened every time he helped someone.

Perhaps that's why one of the elements joining both the afflicted woman and Jairus is their faith. Dozens of people touch Jesus on the way to Jairus' house. But only one touches him with faith. When Jairus is informed his quest to get Jesus to heal his daughter is futile - she's died - Jesus simply says, "Do not be afraid, just have faith."

Life-giving relationships are always faith relationships. Just like eternity is beyond our present understanding, so the actions that guarantee us eternity are also beyond our present understanding. On face value they don't always seem to be worth the effort and draining they demand.

Since in Romans 1 Paul seems to believe Jesus only becomes God at his death and resurrection, in his theology Jesus gains his own eternal life by relating in a giving way with people like the woman along the road and Jairus' daughter. If it's good enough for Jesus . . . .

## JULY 8<sup>TH</sup>, 2018: FOURTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ezekiel 2:2-5    II Corinthians 12:7-10    Mark 6:1-6a

Why would anyone choose to be weak, especially when they could choose to be strong? Yet for some weird reason that's precisely what the risen Jesus calls on his followers to do.

The earliest Christian author, Paul, reached that tough conclusion very quickly after his conversion. "I will . . . boast most gladly of my weaknesses," he tells the Corinthians, "in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me. . . . For when I am weak, then I am strong." Seems to be a total contradiction in terms, something that doesn't make sense on paper.

Yet it works! Using a modern idiom, the Apostle's telling his community, "Try it! You'll like it!" It's a hard to explain faith experience. Unless we're courageous enough to actually experience it, it's something only theologians discuss, rarely a truth we make our own. But if we're serious about becoming other Christs, we have to be willing to imitate the first Christ.

With that imitation in mind, it's important to listen carefully to our gospel pericope. Though this passage is from Mark, subconsciously we're probably hearing Matthew, the account which better fits into our catechism theology, especially at two points in the narrative.

First, Mark initially mentions that one of the reasons Jesus' hometown folks put him down is because he's a nobody. "Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother . . .?" Obviously carpenters were far down on every first century CE Palestinian economic ladder. It didn't take a lot of smarts to make your living just sawing and hammering nails in wood. Certainly didn't make anyone an expert in theology, nor provide them a platform from which to preach Yahweh's word. No good Jew is obligated to listen to an uneducated bumpkin.

Second, at the end of the passage Mark makes an unbelievable (for Christians) statement: "He (Jesus) was *not able* to perform any mighty deed there, apart from . . . He was amazed at their lack of faith." How can this be? We were taught Jesus, as God, is able to do anything. (We even had a grade school discussion on the possibility of his drawing a "square/circle!") You mean Mark's informing us there's something not even God can do? Without peoples' faith in him, Jesus is helpless.

In copying Mark, Matthew took care of these two missteps. First, he changed Jesus from being the carpenter to being the "son of the carpenter." Quite a switch. This itinerant preacher no longer has a lowly occupation. The gospel Jesus becomes, like Ward Cleaver, a man without a profession. No longer can he be put down for where, or how he works.

Second, Matthew also changes Mark's comment that Jesus "could not" work any miracles to Jesus "did not work" any miracles. The presupposition is he could have done so, but for some reason, freely decided not to. A huge difference.

In both situations, Mark, agreeing with Paul, provides us with a weaker Jesus than Matthew. We presume the historical Jesus found no problem serving Yahweh in a way that exposed his weaknesses. No doubt he frequently reflected on the problems Ezekiel experienced as a prophet in today's first reading.

The late Rudolf Bultmann often reminded his students that Jesus, the preacher, eventually became Jesus, the preached. Long before his followers began to preach him, the historical Jesus had to deal with the weakness that accompanies preaching God's word. If we're really another Christ, we're the preaching, not the preached other Christ. We imitate a mentor who had to discover the strength that comes from falling back on God's strength, not his own. There's no other way to do what God expects us to do.