

JULY 15TH, 2018: FIFTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Amos 7:12-15 Ephesians 1:3-14 Mark 6:7-13

The historical Jesus wasn't a one-man show, literally. One of the reasons our evangelists composed their gospels was to demonstrate how the individuals this Galilean carpenter inspired were to work together in expanding his ministry. From the beginning, he shares his dream and his ministry with his followers. Today's gospel pericope is classic. "Jesus summoned the Twelve," Mark writes, "and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over unclean spirits."

It's essential to remember that, according to Mark, the most important ministry for Jesus' followers is to engage in eradicating evil. That's why the first miracle his Jesus works is to exorcize a demoniac. In 1st century CE Palestine, demons were responsible for all sorts of evil; moral, physical, psychological. You name an evil, a demon caused it. So when Jesus gives some of his followers the power to eradicate demons, he's actually giving them the power to eradicate evil, wherever and in whomever it's found.

It's also important that the Twelve are mentioned in this context. Flying in the face of our grade school catechisms, they're not the first bishops or priests. They're simply symbolic of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. (That's why no women are included in their number. These Twelve Tribes began with Jacob's twelve sons. You throw one woman in with them and the symbolism the historical Jesus tries to convey will be destroyed.)

According to modern scholars, the historical Jesus had no intention of founding a church as we know it; he simply wanted to reform Judaism – all of Judaism, not just the two preeminent tribes of Judah and Benjamin. In his plan, minor tribes like Dan and Naphtali were to play just as much a role in that reform as the two major tribes. It was a wide open reform; all are empowered to eradicate evil, not just the "privileged." In this passage, Jesus intentionally sends out representatives of all, to all.

We smile at some of the practical helps Mark's Jesus gives his disciples to aid in carrying out their ministry: where to stay, what to wear, how much money to take along, even what to do when rejected. Yet, no matter the obstacles they encountered, they "drove out many demons." They wiped out evil.

Yet, as the author of Ephesians writes, no matter the results, they should simply be grateful they, of all people, were chosen for this life and world-changing work. For some reason, they "heard the word of truth, the good news of salvation, and have believed in him (Jesus)." No one can argue with God's choice.

This is especially true when we cross paths with the earliest "book prophet:" Amos. As a wilderness shepherd he's most unlikely to be chosen one of Yahweh's prophets. I wish we had a snapshot of his encounter with Amaziah, or just a whiff of the smell emanating from the prophet. The contrast between the two was memorable. Carroll Stuhlmueller once commented, "If Amos took a bath once a year, he'd have been filthy clean. Besides, can you picture him ever using a handkerchief to blow his nose?" Yet, "Yahweh took (him) from following the flock, and said to (him), 'Go prophesy to my people Israel.'" The word of Yahweh he proclaimed was infinitely more powerful than Amaziah's priestly robes and the office he held. Which of the two eradicated more evil?

My oncologist recently inquired about our acute priest shortage. "It's easy to understand," I replied. "Can you imagine how many oncologists we'd have if we limited them to male celibates?"

I'd really be careful about who we, the church, refuses to call for ministry. If we're not imitating Jesus' openness, we'll have to answer for a lot of the evil we encounter.

COPYRIGHT 2018 – ROGER VERMALEN KARBAN

JULY 22ND, 2018: SIXTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Jeremiah 23:1-6 Ephesians 2:13-18 Mark 6:30-34

When John McKenzie wrote his now classic *Authority in the Church* in the late 60s, he shook up lots of Catholics, pointing out that our sacred authors are much more concerned with the authority sins of our leaders than those of the general populace. Followers of God should be more conscious of how authority is exercised than how it's obeyed. Today's three readings certainly reinforce the late Jesuit's thesis.

Many of us don't appreciate the biblical separation of ministries and/or gifts. For instance, we frequently confuse those who exercise authority – the administrators – with those who proclaim God's will – the prophets. Prophets are the people's conscience; unique individuals who give us the future implications of our present actions. Administrators, on the other hand, surface and listen to the prophets and put their words into concrete actions, demonstrating how to make God's will part of our everyday lives. (Carroll Stuhlmueller was convinced prophets normally make lousy administrators; administrators, lousy prophets.)

When our sacred authors challenge those in authority to get their act together, they're accusing them of not instructing people to live their faith as God wants it to be lived. Almost always, these administrators aren't living it correctly themselves, so it's no wonder those in their care aren't living it correctly.

The message God wants prophets to proclaim and administrators to carry out certainly isn't easy to accept. It has nothing to do with religious rituals or catechism trivia. It goes to the heart not only of one's faith, but to one's personal value system.

The Pauline disciple responsible for Ephesians leaves no doubt about how difficult it is to be committed to the message he proclaims. As a disciple of the risen Jesus, he's expected to work on forming diverse people into one community of faith. In this situation, it's those who are "far off" (Gentiles) and those who are "near" (Jews). He's expected to "break down the dividing wall of enmity" that separates them, something we haven't been able to successfully pull off to this day.

Six hundred years before Jesus' birth, Jeremiah realized his fellow Jews couldn't even unify their own people. Yahweh had prophetically sent the right message, but the "shepherds" – the kings – hadn't passed it on to the ordinary people. The prophet saw only one solution: replace the shepherds, and send one special, prophetic shepherd – the messiah – to take care of the problem once and for all. That's where today's gospel comes in.

Jesus has just sent out his disciples to eradicate evil (last week's commentary.) Now they've returned for a little r&r. In the process Jesus mentions one of the main things motivating his ministry. "When he . . . saw the vast crowd his heart was moved with pity . . . for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things." If they're not blessed with good leaders, Jesus simply must step in and personally exercise that ministry. But, just as he did in the prior passage, he shares his ministry with his followers.

Sadly, we never hear that part of Mark's theology. It's contained in a passage omitted from our liturgical readings: the miraculous feeding of the people. In Mark's version of the event, the disciples do the actual feeding. Jesus' role is simply to motivate them to share their meager food, then bless it before they distribute it. It's their food; they do the sharing.

Jesus' message is that we become one by sharing what little we have with others. We no longer need to fall back on what our leaders say, or don't say. We carry on the ministry of Jesus. We don't need more authority than that.

We just can't forget what Scripture says about those in authority.

COPYRIGHT 2018 – ROGER VERMALEN KARBAN