

MARCH 3RD, 2019: EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Sirach 27:4-7 I Corinthians 15:54-58 Luke 6:39-45

The late George Carlin surprised me during the O. J. Simpson trial by mentioning, “I watch every minute of it.” When challenged about his TV viewing habits, he pointed out, “Why wouldn’t I? I need the material. Besides, people are only themselves when they’re under pressure. And there’s sure been a lot of pressure during that trial.”

I suspect the gospel Jesus would have agreed. Unlike Carlin, he didn’t need the material, but he always insisted that people be their real selves. That’s why, in today’s gospel pericope, he uses the most biting term he ever employs against anyone: hypocrite. Ignoring modern usage, hypocrite’s not a pejorative word. It simply refers to an actress or actor. Nothing necessarily bad about that profession. Recently, for instance, the Academy of Motion Pictures handed out statuettes to the best hypocrites of last year.

But anyone with the least bit of moxie knows there’s almost always a huge difference between actors and the characters they play in their movies. One of my favorite quotes on that topic comes from Rita Hayworth. When asked why she was married five times, she pointed out, “I presume most of my husbands went to bed with Gilda on our wedding night, but the next morning they woke up next to Rita.” They simply supposed she was one of the movie characters she famously portrayed.

Unless we’re up for some acting award, the gospel Jesus always encourages us to be ourselves. It’s a waste of time to be anything else. But how do we cut through the acting that’s part of most of our lives?

Sirach seems to agree with Carlin’s method for uncovering an individual’s real persona: pressure. In his words, unless a sieve is shaken, we’ll never know what’s in it. Only by “testing” can we reach who we actually are.

According to Paul, that testing will not only open up our real personalities, it’ll also bring us real life. Only if we’re willing to endure the deaths which imitating the “works” of Jesus entail, will we eventually achieve the immortality we all desire. It’s the only way we can sluff off those corruptible characteristics which are part of our hypocritical self.

In today’s gospel, Luke has collected and shared a handful of Jesus’ sayings that pertain to how a non-actor lives his or her faith. Jesus’ most memorable quote compares the minute splinter in our neighbor’s eye with the huge wooden beam in our own. We’re so concerned with focusing on our neighbor’s faults that we completely overlook ours. Convinced we’ll better the world just by ridding it of everyone’s sins but ours, their flaws are the only ones we confront.

Perhaps that’s why the gospel Jesus so frequently refers to the “fruit” we produce. In his mind, it’s a copout just to boast about the evil we’ve avoided and overlook the fact that we haven’t done any positive good. A tree doesn’t take up the orchard’s valuable ground just because it hasn’t contracted any diseases, but because it constantly generates fruit. For Jesus, producing nothing good is just as bad as doing something evil.

If we’re to sluff off our hypocritical personalities and become real people, it’s important how we examine our consciences. According to Jesus’ morality, we don’t first create a list of sins, then check off the ones we’ve committed, supposing the person with the least check marks wins. We’ve learned from Luke’s Sermon on the Plain that his Jesus starts off not with a list of sins, but with a list of good things he wants us to accomplish. He expects us to examine ourselves not on what we’ve avoided, but on what we, the good people he’s created, have actually achieved.

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MARCH 10TH, 2019: FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT
Deuteronomy 26:4-10 Romans 10:8-13 Luke 4:1-13

Long before Lent became a dreaded period of penance it was simply a time for reflection. It consisted of a few weeks set aside every year for Christians to ponder the implications of actually being other Christs. Though the local church's catechumens originally used these days to prepare for their Holy Saturday baptisms, the rest of the community couldn't help but think back to their own experiences of dying and rising with Christ. Often when presiding at weddings, for a second or two I take my eyes off the couple exchanging their vows and glance at some of the people in the church who've already made that commitment, imagining what's going on in their minds. I take for granted they have different perspectives on those words than the pair uttering them for the first time.

Just so, the already baptized will think about these Lenten preparations from a different perspective than those anxiously awaiting this specific Easter. These "old timers" have already been through the mill; they know where the bodies have been buried, though it might have taken years to discover them. Nothing can replace their years of experienced reflecting

As far as we can tell, no one sat down on the original Easter Sunday night, took stylus in hand and started to write the Christian Scriptures. It was at least 20 years before Paul, our initial Christian author, penned his first letter to the Thessalonians, our earliest Christian writing. All our authors had time to "think things over." No gospel or letter was composed cold turkey. The various communities' experiences of living their faith affected the way their sacred authors wrote about that faith.

This biblical process didn't begin with the Christian Scriptures; it was already at work centuries before during the composition of the Hebrew Scriptures. For instance, the author of Deuteronomy, along with his community, had encountered Yahweh present and working among the Chosen People for dozens of generations before the classic profession of faith took the form which is at the heart of today's Deuteronomy passage. It took the Israelites hundreds of years to understand what Yahweh had accomplished for Jacob, the "wandering Aramean," and his family. Only gradually, for instance, did they begin to appreciate this specific ritual was talking about "us" and not "them." They were experiencing some of the same things their ancestors had experienced.

In the same way, it took Paul a long time before he was able to click off the essentials of faith which he mentions in today's second reading. The Apostle didn't come to all those insights immediately after his Damascus Road conversion. Lots of reflection went into that list. I wonder how frustrated his personal secretary must have been taking his dictation. How often did he say, "Let's do that line again?"

Most interesting are the Lucan temptations the gospel Jesus endures while fasting in the wilderness. The earliest evangelist, Mark, only says Jesus was tempted. He doesn't provide a list of them. The well-known three only appear a generation later in the collection of sayings we know as the "Q," where both Matthew and Luke find them.

This seems to tell us the early Christian community didn't come up with these specific three until they reflected for at least a decade on the temptations the church was experiencing years after the historical Jesus' death and resurrection. Seems these specific sins didn't become evident until after that reflection.

If we actually spend the next seven weeks not in penance, but in reflecting, as the early Christians did, on the implications of being another Christ, I wonder what specific new sins we might come up with. Only recently, for example, have I learned about the sin of clericalism. Could there be others?