

AUGUST 30, 2020: TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Jeremiah 20:7-9 Romans 12:1-2 Matthew 16:21-27

The late Carrol Stuhlmueller once mentioned in class that the Hebrew word rendered as “duped” in the initial verse of today’s Jeremiah reading is normally translated as “rape” when used in other places of the Hebrew Scriptures. Given that the next line in this notorious chapter 20 reads, “. . . you were too strong for me, and you triumphed,” that would also seem to be what the prophet is accusing Yahweh of doing to him. No wonder our modern translators watered down the word. We’re accustomed to regarding God as our Redeemer, our Savior, not as our Rapist. Yet, as blasphemous as it is, that seems to be exactly how Jeremiah looks at his relationship with Yahweh.

When, as a child, I began walking to school alone, my mother frequently warned me never to get into a car with a stranger. Only much later did I understand she wasn’t worried about the stranger’s reckless driving record; she feared something much worse. Today Jeremiah confesses, “Years ago I didn’t listen to my mother. I got into a car with Yahweh, and I’m still suffering the consequences.” The prophet is very concrete: “I am an object of laughter; everyone mocks me . . . the word of Yahweh has brought me derision and reproach all the day.”

Even worse, Jeremiah can’t tell Yahweh, “Take this job and” It’s as though he’s joined the mafia; there’s no way he can get out of it. “I say to myself, I will not mention him, I will speak in his name no more. But then it becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it.” He’s trapped! He’s going to have to be a prophet – with all the pain that entails - till the day he dies.

Jesus of Nazareth’s earliest followers could identify with Jeremiah on all sorts of levels. Though, unlike this 7th century BCE prophet, they can fall back on a belief in an afterlife which eventually levels the faith playing-field, it doesn’t take long for them to discover their relationship with this itinerant preacher brings lots of suffering. That’s why immediately after Matthew has Peter declare Jesus is the “Messiah, the Son of the Living God,” this divine Christ informs his followers “. . . that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly . . . be killed and on the third day be raised.” Peter hadn’t planned on that kind of salvation.

It’s bad enough this Galilean carpenter will have to undergo such pain, but it’s even worse that he expects his followers to endure the same suffering. They, like Jesus, will have to carry their “tau:” be totally open to whatever God wants them to do. Only those who are willing to lose their lives will eventually gain the life Jesus experiences and promises. It’s as though God’s fighting against God.

Even before Matthew wrote his gospel, Paul of Tarsus discovered that same dying/rising reality. It comes with the territory. In our second reading, he reminds the Christian community in Rome that unless they “offer” their bodies as a living sacrifice, they’ll never achieve the life the risen Jesus has achieved.

When Peanuts’ Charlie Brown once mentioned to Lucy that, “Life’s a matter of ups and downs,” Lucy immediately countered with, “I don’t want any downs! I just want to go up, up, up!” I presume each of us can identify with Lucy. Yet at the same time we’re trying to imitate someone who constantly tried to “discern what is the will of God.”

Jesus not only got into the car with Yahweh, he holds the door open for us to jump in with him.

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SEPTEMBER 6TH, 2020: TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ezekiel 33:7-9 Romans 13:8-10 Matthew 18:15-20

Years ago, in a radio interview, the late actor Dennis Weaver mentioned why Gunsmoke's Mr. Dillon had a sidekick like Chester. "All radio and TV western heroes needed someone to be with them, otherwise the show and movies would be terribly boring; the audience would never know what the heroes were thinking. The Lone Ranger talks to Tonto; Gene Autry confides in Smiley Burnette. Without their sidekicks, the heroes wouldn't have been heroes."

In some sense, the same thing applies to our faith. Unless we somehow associate with others, our faith – no matter how deep - could quickly become meaningless.

Biblical faith is never to be lived on a mountain top. Only when it's experienced in the midst of a community does it make sense. Unless we're relating with others, the examples of living given us by Yahweh and the risen Jesus are useless. It's easy to "imagine" we're believers. Actually giving ourselves for others proves it. As M*A*S*H's Fr. Mulcahy once observed, "No matter how good you are at bluffing in poker, eventually you've got to show your cards." Only then does the rubber hit the road.

Paul reflects on our unique situation in today's second reading: "Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another" Biblical faith only comes alive when we share our love with others. Since nothing should stand in the way of that love, the Apostle reminds those early Jewish/Christians in the Roman church whose lives once revolved around obeying the 613 Laws of Moses, "Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law."

Yet, as we know, there's no one action that to everyone always shows love. Our acts of love differ because the needs of those we love differ. As a prophet, for instance, Ezekiel shows love by being the community's "watchman." It's his responsibility to let them know what Yahweh wants them to do. In 6th century BCE Israel, the normal way the Chosen People surface God's will is by first surfacing the community's prophets, then carrying out what they tell them to do. If any prophet refuses to follow through on his/her ministry, they'll suffer the same punishment as those who refuse to listen to Yahweh.

Because the first followers of Jesus were convinced they shared in Jesus' prophetic ministry, Matthew's Jesus stresses their responsibility to confront others in the community when those others refuse to show love to those around them.

Though overlooked by many, in today's gospel pericope the whole community receives the same power to bind and loose that Peter personally received back in chapter 16; a built-in tension which Matthew is convinced is necessary in any loving Christian community. In other words, there're no simple answers to complicated questions. Not only that, but Jesus takes his disciples' prerogatives one step further. ". . . If two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father."

Of course, all this community stuff must be seen against the background of love. We're not just people who accidentally find ourselves in the same stadium crowd. We're actually the loving body of Christ. As Matthew's community quickly found out, it's in the acts of love we share that we discover the risen Jesus in our midst. "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

The people we encounter during our lives aren't just sidekicks who help us reveal ourselves to others. More than anything else, they help us reveal ourselves to ourselves. Only when we show them love do we surface the hero in ourselves.

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