

There's a frequently overlooked line in Genesis 39 that conveys an essential biblical belief.

When the wife of Joseph's Egyptian master demands he "lie" with her, he refuses, reminding her initially of the loyalty he owes her husband. But then he says something unique: "How could I commit so great a wrong and thus stand condemned before God?" Though the sacred author doesn't give the rejected woman's response, I presume it would have been something like, "What are you talking about? The gods don't give a darn about what we do on earth."

Most people in the ancient world believed their only obligation to the gods was to keep them satisfied with the proper ritual sacrifices they expected several times a year. Once they did so, they were free to do whatever they wished. They had responsibilities to one another, but not to the gods.

But, flying in the face of this "*laissez-faire*" theology, the God of the Israelites so identifies with people that what one does to those around him or her is looked upon as being done to Yahweh. Quite a novel belief. Yet it's the linchpin of our moral theology.

That's why the author of Sirach can ask the biting question found in today's first reading: "Could anyone nourish anger against another and expect healing from Yahweh?" When we're relating with others, we're also relating with God. Even more, God's forgiveness of us is dependent on our forgiveness of others. "Forgive your neighbor's injustice," Sirach writes, "then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven." Nothing could be clearer.

As a good Jew, Matthew's Jesus is also convinced of that process. His well-known story about the king's two indebted servants hits home. If God's already forgiven each of us an astronomical debt, how can we still demand repayment of the minuscule debt others owe us? (By the way, getting back to Genesis again, Jesus' "seventy-seven" instances of forgiveness is simply a reversal of Lamech's chapter 4 boast of being avenged "seventy-seven fold.") Jesus' God can always be counted on to forgive those who forgive.

But probably the most important reading today is Paul's Romans pericope.

Normally the older we get, the more we realize the implications of our actions. It's one thing for a three-year-old child to tell its mother, "I hate you!" It's another thing for a thirty-year-old to say those same words. The latter sees implications the former has yet to learn.

As we get older in our faith, we also discover more implications of our actions; we more deeply understand Paul's insight that "none of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself." Whatever we do somehow affects others. More than anything, it affects our relationship with the risen Jesus among us.

We can never forget that the basic message of the historical Jesus revolved around God's kingdom being at hand. He went town to town, synagogue to synagogue pointing out that Yahweh is already among us, working effectively in our lives.

There's just one "kicker." To surface God's presence we must "repent:" turn our value system upside down. What we once thought important, we now regard as insignificant, and vice versa. The needs of others, not our own needs, are now at the center of our lives, the focus of our actions. That value switch is the death all other Christs are expected to experience.

No one expresses that experience better than Paul. "If we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's." More people than the Egyptian's wife would be befuddled by such a unique theology.

SEPTEMBER 20TH, 2020: TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 55:6-9 Philippians 1:20c-24, 27a Matthew 20:1-16a

Those who choose to live lives of faith, choose to live with tension. That's certainly clear from today's three readings. Instead of dealing with either/ors, they're constantly forced to cope with both/ands.

Nowhere in Scripture is this stated more emphatically than in our Deutero-Isaiah passage. "Seek Yahweh while he may be found, call him while he is near. . . . As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts." Scholars refer to this phenomenon as God's simultaneous "imminence and transcendence." In other words, God's as close to us as our breath; yet as far from us as night is from day. No matter which presence we experience today, only God knows which one we'll experience tomorrow.

Today's pericope from Matthew has bothered me since, as a child, I heard it proclaimed every year in church. It's totally unfair! How can anyone justify paying someone who works one hour the same amount of money another person earns for working a full day? (My father, a strong union man, would, from personal experience, always remind us kids, "That's why you need to unionize. If you don't have a union, you'll always get jerked around like that.)

As "unfair" as the landowner's actions are, one must appreciate the tension which prompted this unique story, a tension deeply felt by Jewish Christians.

These faithful Israelites had followed the 613 Mosaic laws their whole lives, looked forward to the arrival of a Messiah, and were among the small minority of their people who recognized Jesus of Nazareth as being that promised savior. Now, after Jesus' death and resurrection, they were receiving the "rewards" to which their years of faithfulness entitled them.

There was just one problem: non-Jews were now being accepted into the Christian community on the same level as they had been accepted. These Gentile-Christians didn't even know the difference between a lox and a bagel. Yet they were regarded as full-fledged disciples of Jesus. (Reminds me of patiently waiting three years to finally play ping pong in the seminary's senior rec hall, only to discover on the first day of school that the administration had transformed those glorious precincts into the junior/senior rec hall!)

Matthew's Jesus simply reminds the gospel readers that at the same time God treats people fairly, God's also tremendously generous. Those who freely give themselves over to God must learn to live in that biting tension. We follow a God who, though he/she loves us, doesn't always treat us fairly, especially when we discover how God treats others. That's just part of the price we pay for being people of faith.

But, as Paul reminds the Philippians, he lives in the midst of an even deeper tension. "I long to depart this life and be with Christ," he writes, "for that is far better. Yet that I remain in the flesh is more necessary for your benefit." Do I pray for God to do what's good for me, or for what's good for those around me? Just how much of myself does God expect me to sacrifice for others?

At this point of his life, the Apostle simply wants to be completely one with the risen Jesus, the oneness that only comes from his physical death. He certainly doesn't regard that death as an evil. Yet, for the good of others, he's still here on earth, experiencing all the painful daily deaths a generous Christian life entails. As with all other tensions, there's no one perfect answer.

None of us can avoid tension in our lives. We just pray that, as Christians, we have the "right" tensions, not a bunch of "wrong" ones.