

SEPTEMBER 27, 2020: TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ezekiel 18:25-28 Philippians 2:1-11 Matthew 21:28-32

A friend once mentioned, based on the gospel Jesus' comment in Mark 2 that he came not to call the just but sinners, that only sinners can be Christians. Jesus didn't come to save anyone who presumed she or he was already saved. No doubt that's why conversion is brought up so frequently in the Christian Scriptures. For Jesus' followers, there's always a need and a chance to "repent," to turn our value systems upside down. We never reach a point in our faith when we can start to coast, content just to be on an even keel. Faith implies we're committing ourselves to a constant struggle.

The God whom Jesus of Nazareth preached isn't a God who just carries snapshots of us in his/her billfold, glancing at them whenever we seek some divine help. "Primitive" people who won't let tourists take their picture because they believe the process will kill them are correct. Photographs do kill us. They stop our lives at a specific time and place in history. Unless we're masters of photo retouching, we'll always be the same person we were the instant the camera snapped us. We can't grow or change.

Thankfully God doesn't have photos of us. God actually carries us, the living, evolving individuals he/she created. As long as we live, we can always repent; we can see people and things from a perspective we never before noticed and develop a new way of judging them.

Obviously that belief prompts Matthew's Jesus to tell the two son's story which triggers today's gospel pericope about prostitutes and tax collectors "entering the kingdom of God" before the "righteous" even know such a kingdom exists. No matter what someone once decided to do, say or be, that person isn't bound to defend that choice for the rest of his or her life. It's embarrassing for the good folk to be told that society's outcasts and sinners are better at repenting than they are.

More than 500 years before Jesus' birth, Ezekiel proclaims a similar message. But the prophet emphasizes it's a two-way street. Just as someone can turn from evil and embrace good, so someone can reject good and start down a path of evil. Value systems can always be switched – in either direction.

Paul's Philippians passage seems to fit perfectly into today's conversion theme. The Apostle begins by encouraging his readers to change the way they regard one another, urging them to be ". . . of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing," eventually reaching a point in which they cease looking out for their own interests and begin to be concerned for the interests of others. But, for me, the interesting part of these verses comes when he uses Jesus as an example of such an "emptying" of self. Did this Galilean carpenter actually go through a conversion at some point of his earthly existence?

Most of us who buy into John the Evangelist's theology that the historical Jesus was God from all eternity find this somewhat disturbing. We each have a holy card photo of a divine Jesus. But as we know from Romans 1, Paul seems to believe Jesus wasn't God until God raised him from the dead. He was "a man like all of us except in sin." Jesus also needed to experience a conversion. Some scholars contend his baptism by John in Mark 1 was actually triggered by that change in his value system.

We shouldn't be discouraged when we find it difficult to change our life's perspective. It might have taken Jesus of Nazareth about 30 years to change his! Certainly explains the length of his "hidden life" better than any other interpretation I've heard.

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OCTOBER 4TH, 2020: TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 5:1-7 Philippians 4:6-9 Matthew 21:33-43

Today's first reading shows us that the image of Israel as Yahweh's vineyard goes back at least 2,700 years, to the ministry of First-Isaiah. Yet it also shows us that Yahweh's problem with the lack of produce from that vineyard also goes back at least that far. "(Yahweh) looked for the crop of grapes, but what it yielded was wild grapes. . . . He looked for judgment, but see, bloodshed! For justice, but hark, the outcry!" Why go to all the trouble to plant and cultivate a vineyard when it produces nothing but frustration?

Matthew's Jesus blames the problem on those who are "sharecropping" the vineyard, an obvious reference to the community's leaders. They've basically stolen God's property, refusing not only to turn over the produce, but even killing those who demanded an accounting of it.

Our gospel pericope is obviously an early Christian allegory. Though its roots most probably go back to the historical Jesus' ministry, some of the "slots" have been filled in (for instance, the murder of the owner's son) by the reflections of second and third generation Christians. But it's important to see that the gospel Jesus isn't rejecting Judaism in favor of Christianity, he's simply saying the Jewish followers of his reform would make better leaders of God's community. Or better, they *should* make better leaders.

As we'll see later in this particular gospel, Matthew's Jesus only criticizes Jewish leaders because the evangelist sees the same behavior in leaders of Christian communities. It's a gentler way of confronting them than by attacking them head on. Matthew wants his readers to ask, "We'd never do that . . . would we?" Of course, the answer is, "Yes! You're already starting to do it."

Leadership in Christian communities has always been a problem. It contains the same pitfalls all leadership faces, especially the temptation for the leader to become more important than those he or she leads. But as Mark's Jesus reminds – and warns - his followers in chapter 10, "That shall never happen among you." Flying in the face of popular culture, among other things Christian leaders are not to be served; they're to serve. Very difficult to pull this off when people are constantly fawning over you. Maybe one way to avoid such a pitfall is to give up your plush medieval palace apartment and actually rent two small rooms in a Vatican City guesthouse. Or . . . every morning you can read and think about Paul's advice to the Philippians which we find in today's second reading.

"Keep on doing," Paul insists, "what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me."

The Apostle is obviously much more concerned with passing on an example than with passing on a collection of dogmas. He expects his communities to imitate him, not just listen to him. If he can't demonstrate how this new-fangled faith makes a difference in how he lives his life, then it's not going to make a difference in their lives either. That's why in his letters he so often tells people to live the way he's living.

I've been disturbed by recent articles probing into the dilemma Pope Francis faces in choosing new bishops. It seems he has no problem finding priests who are dogmatically "safe;" they're all over the place. But he frequently can't surface priests who are committed to imitating both his servant, biblical approach to leadership and his simple lifestyle. Such characteristics seem to be rare commodities among the present younger clergy.

Perhaps Matthew should have been more direct in condemning bad Christian leadership. His gentler, indirect approach doesn't seem to have worked.

I presume Pope Francis would agree.

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