

May 23, 2021, PENTECOST SUNDAY

Acts 2:1-11; I Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13; John 20:19-23

No liturgical feast is more important yet more underrated in our church than Pentecost. Were we to return to its original meaning we'd have to not only change our church government, we'd also have to change the way we picture God working in our lives.

One of the big questions that constantly came up in the early church could be expressed this way, "How do we know what the risen Jesus wants us to do in life?" The Scriptural community was certain they were called to carry on his/her ministry, but how were they practically to do that?

We Catholics long ago stopped asking that question. We learned that we're simply to obey the hierarchical leaders Jesus set up during his earthly ministry. The pope and his bishops not only set the tone for the church, they dictate every one of our dos and don'ts. Scripture is only for extra credit. (And besides, as Luther showed, it can be horribly misleading!) The thing that eventually will lead us to eternal happiness is our faithfulness to the papacy. Though "good" Protestants can get into heaven by following the Bible, even "lukewarm" Catholics can squeeze through its pearly gates by just following the pope.

Our sacred authors – and all the first Christians – would have been amazed at such a frame of mind. In their theology and experience, Jesus left us not a religious system, but a person to carry on after him. That person was his Spirit. Only by surfacing and following that force could we be certain we're doing what the risen Jesus wants us to do.

The coming of the Holy Spirit is so significant that, like Jesus' resurrection, our sacred authors offer us more than one biblical theology to explain it. Luke, whose Spirit-event takes place 50 days after Jesus' resurrection, gives us one in today's first reading. John, whose Spirit arrives on Easter Sunday night, gives us another in our gospel pericope. And Paul uses our I Corinthian reading to remind us of the Spirit's gifts. All three theologies are reflections on what happens when the Spirit breaks into our lives.

Among other things, Luke zeros in on the disruptions Jesus' Spirit brings. Those serious about carrying on her/his ministry, best get used to wind, fire and noise being part of their everyday lives. The Galilean carpenter never promised his historical disciples a tranquil existence; his Spirit follows suite with his post-resurrection disciples. If we really want to surface what God wants us to do in our lives, we'd better emulate Bette Davis' advice, "Buckle your seat belts, it's going to be a bumpy ride!"

John wants to make certain that those who dare to receive the Spirit had better zero in on forgiving those around them. Building communities is essential to our faith. Yet there's no way to pull that off without constantly repairing the bridges we've constructed with one another. Communities don't happen by accident.

Neither does the Body of Christ suddenly appear out of nothing. Paul is convinced the parts of that Spirit-fed body can only maintain their unique diversity when each member contributes to the whole. The Spirit not only blesses us with singular gifts, we're to use those gifts "for some benefit." They're for others, not for ourselves.

Considering the dying that's an integral part of each of these three theologies, I can see why the church eventually soft-pedaled the Spirit and began to concentrate on hierarchical rules and regulations. Far less demands on forgiving, few discussions about integrating diverse gifts into one body, and practically no wind, fire and noise. No wonder Pope Francis is meeting opposition from some of the church's conservatives. They simply want us to return to the good old, peaceful, non-Spirit days.

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MAY 30th, 2021: FEAST OF THE TRINITY

Deuteronomy 4:32-34, 39-40; Romans 8:14-17; Matthew 28:16-20

I grew up with my teachers' warning, "If you can't define it, you don't know it." No matter how hard I'd try to convince them that I really knew the answer to their question, either I handed over a definition or they marked me wrong. There was no middle ground.

I wonder how today's sacred authors would fare at my teachers' hands. Though all three talks about God, none of them provides us with a definition of the Trinity.

It took the "official" church almost 300 years before it even came up with the catechism definition we all learned, the "three persons in one God" one. But as Fr. Bernard Lonergan frequently reminded us Licentiate candidates years ago, the bishops at the Council of Nicaea had to redefine several Greek terms to come up with that well-known, but rarely understood description.

Our Deuteronomic author, Paul and Matthew are much more interested in what God does than in who God is. That's completely understandable. How does someone define a being one cannot comprehend? Rudolf Bultmann once observed that our sacred authors have a built-in problem. They're writing about the "other side" for people who inhabit "this side." Any simile we surface – no matter how insightful - will limp horribly. That's why we should simply be content to reflect on the Trinity's actions in our lives, and leave the definitions until we reach the pearly gates.

Among other things, God's actions constantly demonstrate God's care. The Hebrew Scriptures begin with and revolved around the Exodus. Yahweh's freeing of some enslaved Israelites starts the Jewish

"thing." Their faith doesn't begin with people learning how to define this new God; it starts with Yahweh breaking into their everyday lives in a forceful way. "Did anything so great ever happen before? . . . Did any god venture to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation . . . ?" If Yahweh demands we first learn a definition, we'd have no salvation history.

Paul agrees. He's a good Jew. Since he doesn't worry about defining Yahweh, why should he worry about defining Jesus as God? He's simply concerned with what the risen Jesus does in our lives. Above everything else, the Christ gives us a new personality. Paul reminds the Romans that we've been transformed into God's unique children. No longer God's fearful slaves, we're now on an equal level with God's son. The only kicker is that, like him/her, we have to suffer. There's no other way to attain real life.

But we're not in "this" by ourselves. One of the most significant things the risen Jesus does is simply to be with us. Years ago, one of our local bishops ended his installation homily by quoting today's gospel pericope. Good choice. But there was one problem. He prefaced the quote by saying, "Never forget that this is what Jesus promised right before he ascended into heaven."

He inadvertently mixed up Matthew with Luke. There's no ascension in Matthew. The end of today's gospel pericope is the end of his gospel. Matthew's Jesus doesn't go anywhere. He's still "out there" somewhere with us. If Faith Hill is so close to the person she loves that she can feel him breathe, I presume the risen Jesus is so close to us that we can not only feel him/her breathe, the Christ can also feel us breathe. We're never in this faith thing by ourselves.

If today's feast prompts us to mentally return to our grade school catechism classes, we're celebrating it in a non-biblical way. Only those who, by nightfall, can come up with one or two more ways God's working in our lives have really listened to our readings.

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JUNE 3 or 6, 2021: BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

[Exodus 24:3-8; Hebrews 9:11-15; Mark 14:12-16, 22-26](#)

I've always been amazed at tourists who, at arriving at a famous site, simply park their car, get out, take a picture of it, return to their car, and drive away, never once spending even a few minutes actually looking at the site. They've got a picture of it, why do they need to spend their valuable time looking at it? As crazy as that seems, in my lifetime that's almost exactly what we did with the Eucharist.

When I was a child, almost no one went to communion. I can remember Sundays when more than 200 people were in church, yet fewer than 20 came up for communion. (In some parishes more than half the congregation stood up at communion time, but it was simply the first step in leaving church!)

People's reluctance to participate in the Eucharist was one of the reasons the church instituted today's feast. By specifically gearing readings, music, and liturgical prayers to the celebration of the Lord's Supper it was hoped the Eucharist itself wouldn't fade into the background. Something at the center of the earliest biblical Christian community was in danger of disappearing from its field of vision.

The reason was simple. The late Ohio State football coach Woody Hayes figured it out years ago. When asked why he rarely permitted his quarterbacks to throw passes, Hayes always responded, "Three things can happen when you pass, and two of them are bad."

By the first part of the 20th century, we had so many rules and regulations revolving around receiving communion that we frequently ran the risk of something bad happening when we walked up to the communion rail. For instance, if we were in the state of sin, we'd commit another one by going to communion; since we had to abstain from food and water from midnight on, even a sip of toothpaste water would be sinful. It was best to make only a "spiritual" communion. Couldn't commit any sins that way.

Thankfully by the '50s priests (and popes) began to encourage everyone to receive communion every time they participated in the Eucharist. Nowhere was this stressed more than on First Fridays, when nine of them in a row guaranteed you'd eventually get into heaven. We stopped taking pictures and began to actually experience the site.

Yet some of us are still reaching for our cameras at communion time. We refuse – for whatever reason – to receive from the cup. We habitually walk past the minister of the cup, believing it's for extra credit, something we don't need.

Listen carefully to today's Exodus passage. Those who have the blood sprinkled on them are showing they've made the covenant with Yahweh. The red blotches on their skin and clothes are the covenant's outward sign. Just as a wedding ring is an outward sign two people are committed to one another, the covenant blood is a sign they've formed a special relationship with Yahweh.

We know from I Corinthians 11, that Jesus also gave his followers an outward sign they're willing to carry on his ministry after his death and resurrection: receiving his blood. In some sense, receiving from the cup is more important than receiving the bread. If we're not going to carry on Jesus' ministry, he's died in vain. Perhaps Jesus intended us to first receive the bread simply to strengthen us to receive the cup.

We've still got a long way to go before we completely put our cameras away, and begin to rely on our experiences. If today's feast helps us do that, we're using it the right way. Just remember, the people who gave us our readings never saw a camera. It was all first-hand experiences for them, or nothing.

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JUNE 6th, 2021: TENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR (in some countries and dioceses)

Genesis 3:9-15; II Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35

Can't emphasize enough the importance of today's Genesis reading. One of the earliest writings of the Hebrew Scriptures, it not only sets the theme for many of the writings which follow, but more important for Christians, Jesus of Nazareth seems to have grounded his reform of Judaism in its theology.

Though frequently referred to as God's punishments for original sin, these verses are simply the Yahwistic author's reflections on the "human condition" we're all forced to experience. We have to endure certain things simply because we're alive. We have no choice.

In this specific pericope, the author reflects on our quest to eradicate evil – personified by the serpent. Employing the metaphor of someone stomping a snake to death with one's bare feet, she reminds her readers that only those willing to endure the pain that comes from being bit by the snake will eventually crush the snake. Our heel is never quicker than a snake's fangs. We'll kill the snake, but we'll limp for a long time.

Our Genesis author certainly wants her readers to eradicate evil, but she's realistic about the process. No one just snaps his or her finger and evil disappears. Before we tackle evil, we'd best check the height of our pain threshold. That's the main reason evil persists in our lives. There's not a lot of people willing to suffer through its eradication.

For Christians, here's where Jesus of Nazareth comes in. This first century CE Palestinian preacher was convinced the Yahwistic author had hit the nail on the head. There's no other way to make this world better. Unless someone is willing to suffer, evil remains. But he takes this snake-killing thing one step further. If our evil-destroying stomping includes giving ourselves to others, we'll not only help rid the world of this scourge, we'll also gain life for ourselves.

Our earliest Christian author, Paul, must constantly remind the people he's brought into the faith to simply "hang in there." We have no exact idea what motivates him to write today's II Corinthians passage, but we logically presume it has something to do with the struggle all Christians endure, simply keeping up the fight to get rid of the evil around us.

The first miracle Jesus worked in Mark's gospel was exorcising a demoniac. I mentioned when I commented on it several months ago that the first miracle in each gospel is very significant; it sets the theme for the whole gospel. It basically tells us what Jesus expects of his disciples. If, before anything else, he exorcises a demon, he's telling his followers they, like he, are to get rid of evil, no matter what it costs, no matter how painfully we limp.

That seems to be one of the reasons Mark composed today's gospel pericope. How can we expect to avoid suffering if Jesus couldn't avoid suffering? In this case, the suffering that comes from being misunderstood by those closest to us.

We can understand why some of Jesus' enemies – the Jerusalem scribes – interpret his snake-killing actions as coming from the devil himself. But what's worse, even his relatives – later identified as his "mother(!) and brothers" – are also convinced he's "out of his mind." The preaching that brings life to so many tears his own family apart.

How many of us, for family peace and tranquility, frequently keep our mouths shut instead of speaking up when we discover evil? Why would we create more evil by pointing out the evil that's already there?

If we eventually leave this world in the same condition in which we found it, we, and those around us might experience a peaceful, painless existence, but we'll never do what God put us on earth to do.

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JUNE 13, 2021: ELEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ezekiel 17:22-24; II Corinthians 5:6-10; Mark 4:26-34

One of the first questions Scripture scholars must answer is, “What was going on in the biblical community to prompt the author to write this particular passage?” No one sits down on a beautiful, sunny day, no problems in sight, and writes the Bible. Scripture is only written because our sacred authors discover something is the matter in their communities. No problems, no Bible.

It doesn’t take a doctorate in Scripture to discover the reason our three authors composed today’s readings. Paul states the overriding issue in his II Corinthians pericope: “We walk by faith, not by sight.” People of faith don’t normally see the consequences of their actions. That’s the problem our sacred authors feel compelled to address. Their communities go through life taking for granted their acts of love are having good results though they themselves usually experience few of those results. According to the Apostle, the instant gratification we long for will only take place after “we leave the body and go home to the Lord.” In the meantime, we’re forced to do a lot of hoping.

The gospel Jesus certainly didn’t feed his followers any “fake news” when he talked about what they could expect as his disciples. He couldn’t have been more truthful or realistic. As a first century CE Palestinian Jew, only one basic metaphor applied: farming.

“The kingdom of God,” he warns, “is as if people scatter seed on the land, sleep and rise night and day and through it all the seed sprouts and grows, they know not how.” As I quickly discovered when I first planted nasturtium seeds with my dad, nothing’s going to come up out of the ground for a long time, no matter how often you sneak a look, hoping for something to appear above ground.

Though Jesus engages in “Semitic exaggeration” when he refers to a mustard seed as “the smallest of all the seeds on earth,” and to a mustard plant as “the largest of plants,” his point is clear: if we’re not willing to start small we’ll never end up big. We always have to presume growth, even in our encounters with God.

It’s significant that Mark’s Jesus employs the phrase “the kingdom of God” in this passage. That’s how this Galilean carpenter normally refers to God working effectively in our lives. It’s not how we’re personally working, it’s how God’s working. That’s where we encounter the problem. More than five centuries before Jesus’ birth, Ezekiel also realized that when you’re dealing with Yahweh, you’ve got to be patient. Eventually God will cause the cedar tree of our life “to put forth branches and bear fruit,” but it’s in God’s time, not ours.

Through the years, one of my most popular commentaries was the one in which I used the image of monarch butterfly migrations as a way of understanding our role in God’s kingdom. It takes up to at least four generations of butterflies to complete the 3,000-mile trip from Mexico to Canada, and back to Mexico every year. No one butterfly is able to pull the migration off by itself. Most of the insects experience only a small portion of the trip. They have no idea what the whole trip is like or where it’s taking them. I don’t know if butterflies are capable of faith, but they certainly are a terrific metaphor for our going through life on faith.

Since monarchs aren’t indigenous to Palestine it’s no wonder the historical Jesus didn’t employ them when talking about our walking by faith and not by sight. But there’s no need to exaggerate the metaphor the next time we see one of those little critters fly past. Their connection with us is evident.

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06/20/2021: TWELFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

[Job 38:1, 8-11; II Corinthians 5:14-17; Mark 4:35-41](#)

The summer before I left to study theology in Rome one of the older Sisters who did domestic chores in the hospital in which I worked gave me one of the most meaningful gifts I've ever received. It was a funeral home calendar picture of the scene depicted in today's gospel: Jesus calming the storm. She'd carefully put it between two sheets of plastic, woven boondoggle around the perimeter and glued a cardboard stand on its backside. "I know you're going to have a hard time in Rome," she said. "I've heard seminarians really have to study hard there. But when you're tempted to give up, look at this picture. If Jesus could calm that storm at sea, he can also calm the storms in your life."

Though her fear of my having to work hard was obviously engendered by seminarian "propaganda," Sister Baptist's message that afternoon completely mirrored the message Mark was trying to convey by including this miracle story in his gospel.

Markan scholars are convinced Mark accomplished this by first taking a miracle story used by preachers to emphasize Jesus' power over nature and adding several phrases to make it applicable to his readers' everyday lives. The added lines are, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing? . . . Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith? . . . Even the wind and sea obey him."

Mark presumed all people of faith often feel abandoned by the person in whom they've placed their faith. They sense they're "perishing" and no one – even Jesus – gives a darn about them.

Yet it's in the very midst of our feeling abandoned that we most encounter the risen Jesus, assuring us that we need to put more of our faith in him/her, not less. The evangelist believes that it's precisely during those times that Jesus expects us to give ourselves more intensely to others, and not give into the temptation to back off from those acts of faith which our imitation of Jesus demand.

After all, someone whom even the "sea and wind obey" must be powerful enough, as Sister Baptist pointed out, to calm the storm of abandonment in our own personal lives. When we're dealing with God, we're dealing with a unique person.

As we hear in today's first reading, Yahweh's "otherness" was the only thing which could explain the sudden, devastating influx of evil in Job's life. Job eventually came to understand that Yahweh could do things which he could only dream about. If we presume God's unexplainable actions in nature, why should we question God's unexplainable actions in our own lives? Yahweh operates on levels we humans can't comprehend.

But, as Paul reminds the other Christs in the Corinthian church, we're expected to do more than just admire the way God operates. Our becoming one with the risen Jesus means we've also become part of God's incomprehensible world. We, like the risen Jesus, are now "new creations," expected to live our lives on a new level; a level on which "we no longer live for ourselves, but for him who for our sake died and was raised."

It's significant that Paul never personally knew the historical Jesus: the itinerant preacher who lived in Palestine during 6 BCE and 30 CE. Like ourselves, the Apostle experienced only the risen Jesus. That means he wasn't "distracted" by Jesus' humanity. On the Damascus road, Paul stepped instantly into a new world; a world in which his faith in Jesus' presence grew even in those moments when he felt most deserted by God - something we need to be assured of every day of our lives.

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June 27, 2021: THIRTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Wisdom 1:13-15; 2:23-24; II Corinthians 8:7, 9, 13-15; Mark 5:21-43

I can't stress enough the importance of today's Wisdom reading. It contains a biblical smoking gun, something for which scholars searched for centuries.

The idea of an afterlife didn't come into Jewish theology until a century before Jesus' birth. Before then, this present life was the only life we could expect. Everything had to happen between our physical birth and death. Then, almost out of nowhere, Pharisees begin to teach that, if we keep our noses clean, we can live eternally with Yahweh. Though most Jews eventually accepted some form of that belief, the big question was, "Where did they get such a faith-changing insight?" Yahweh doesn't seem to have simply appeared to someone and let them in on the secret.

Originally most scholars reasoned these particular Pharisees must have somehow come in contact with Greek thinkers who believed we have an immaterial soul, a part of us than never decays. It'll live on forever, even after our physical deaths. The only problem with that explanation was that no one could find an actual contact between Jews and Greeks. There was no smoking gun.

Then, about thirty years ago, some experts, like the late Roland Murphy, began to realize the weapon is right in front of us, in Wisdom 1:15: "For justice is undying."

Since *justice* is the biblical way of referring to the proper relationships we have with God and those around us, it appears the Pharisees figured because Yahweh is immortal, anyone in a just relationship with Yahweh will also be immortal. If God wants to keep their relationship going after death, they'll live forever.

Certainly more meaningful to root immortality in a union with God instead of an "accident" of nature. That also seems why the prophets and Jesus of Nazareth so frequently stress our tie-in with God and the people around us. Those relations guarantee eternity.

Paul is deeply convinced that interacting with the people we encounter in our lives is how we work out our salvation, but only if we do so in a giving relationship. He reminds his Corinthian community that we're simply to imitate Jesus' oneness with ourselves. "Though he was rich," the Apostle writes, "for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." By giving life to others, we gain eternal life.

Mark's Jesus does precisely that in today's gospel pericope, resuscitating Jairus' daughter and healing the woman with the uterine bleeding. Notice in doing the latter, the evangelist remarks Jesus was "... aware that power had gone out of him." Often we imagine the historical Jesus simply snapped his fingers and good things happened. We don't realize those good things drained Jesus. He was weakened every time he helped someone.

Perhaps that's why one of the elements joining both the afflicted woman and Jairus is their faith. Dozens of people touch Jesus on the way to Jairus' house. But only one touches him with faith. When Jairus is informed his quest to get Jesus to heal his daughter is futile - she's died – Jesus simply says, "Do not be afraid, just have faith."

Life-giving relationships are always faith relationships. Just like eternity is beyond our present understanding, so the actions that guarantee us eternity are also beyond our present understanding. On face value they don't always seem to be worth the effort and draining they demand.

Since in Romans 1 Paul seems to believe Jesus only becomes God at his death and resurrection, in his theology Jesus gains his own eternal life by relating in a giving way with people like the woman along the road and Jairus' daughter. If it's good enough for Jesus

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JULY 4th, 2020: FOURTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Ezekiel 2:2-5; II Corinthians 12:7-10; Mark 6:1-6a

The earliest Christian author, Paul, reached that tough conclusion very quickly after his conversion. “I will . . . boast most gladly of my weaknesses,” he tells the Corinthians, “in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me. . . . For when I am weak, then I am strong.” Seems to be a total contradiction in terms, something that doesn’t make sense on paper.

Yet it works! Using a modern idiom, the Apostle’s telling his community, “Try it! You’ll like it!” It’s a hard to explain faith experience. Unless we’re courageous enough to actually experience it, it’s something only theologians discuss, rarely a truth we make our own. But if we’re serious about becoming other Christs, we have to be willing to imitate the first Christ.

With that imitation in mind, it’s important to listen carefully to our gospel pericope. Though this passage is from Mark, subconsciously we’re probably hearing Matthew, the account which better fits into our catechism theology, especially at two points in the narrative.

First, Mark initially mentions that one of the reasons Jesus’ hometown folks put him down is because he’s a nobody. “Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother . . . ?” Obviously carpenters were far down on every first century CE Palestinian economic ladder. It didn’t take a lot of smarts to make your living just sawing and hammering nails in wood. Certainly didn’t make anyone an expert in theology, nor provide them a platform from which to preach Yahweh’s word. No good Jew is obligated to listen to an uneducated bumpkin.

Second, at the end of the passage Mark makes an unbelievable (for Christians) statement: “He (Jesus) was not able to perform any mighty deed there, apart from . . . He was amazed at their lack of faith.” How can this be? We were taught Jesus, as God, is able to do anything. (We even had a grade school discussion on the possibility of his drawing a “square/circle!”) You mean Mark’s informing us there’s something not even God can do? Without peoples’ faith in him, Jesus is helpless.

In copying Mark, Matthew took care of these two missteps. First, he changed Jesus from being the carpenter to being the “son of the carpenter.” Quite a switch. This itinerant preacher no longer has a lowly occupation. The gospel Jesus becomes, like Ward Cleaver, a man without a profession. No longer can he be put down for where, or how he works.

Second, Matthew also changes Mark’s comment that Jesus “could not” work any miracles to Jesus “did not work” any miracles. The presupposition is he could have done so, but for some reason, freely decided not to. A huge difference.

In both situations, Mark, agreeing with Paul, provides us with a weaker Jesus than Matthew. We presume the historical Jesus found no problem serving Yahweh in a way that exposed his weaknesses. No doubt he frequently reflected on the problems Ezekiel experienced as a prophet in today’s first reading.

The late Rudolf Bultmann often reminded his students that Jesus, the preacher, eventually became Jesus, the preached. Long before his followers began to preach him, the historical Jesus had to deal with the weakness that accompanies preaching God’s word. If we’re really another Christ, we’re the preaching, not the preached other Christ. We imitate a mentor who had to discover the strength that comes from falling back on God’s strength, not his own. There’s no other way to do what God expects us to do.

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JULY 11th, 2021: 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.

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JULY 18th, 2021: 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 Stuhlmuller 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.

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