

FEBRUARY 20, 2011: SEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18 1 Corinthians 3:16-23 Matthew 5:38-48

One of the most important lines in Scripture is part of today's first reading. "Yahweh said to Moses, 'Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them: Be holy, for I, Yahweh, your God am holy.'" Matthew's Jesus parallels that line with this Sermon on the Mount command, "Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures teach the same basic lesson: followers of God are expected to imitate God. Certainly not an easy endeavor, especially since our Leviticus author labels God "holy." Scholars agree the best way to translate the original Hebrew for holy is "other." God is totally different from you and me; the one entity in our universe who is completely other than we are. That means that, just as Yahweh stands in contrast to all other creation, so we're to stand in contrast to all around us.

The writer of Leviticus gives an example of the otherness Yahweh expects of us. "You shall not bear hatred for your brother or sister in your heart . . . take no revenge and cherish no grudge against any of your people. You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Anyone consistently acting in this manner would certainly be judged different, if not crazy.

The problem is that God's otherness is an evolving concept. Jesus demands his followers discover even more holiness in Yahweh than the authors of the Torah surfaced. When he says, "You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. . . YOU shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,'" he's quoting the Mosaic Law: the 613 regulations all biblical Jews are expected to obey. Jesus expects his disciples to see dimensions in God's personality that his Jewish ancestors hadn't noticed.

"Offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on one cheek, turn the other as well... Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go for two miles Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.... If you only love those who love you, what recompense will you have?"

His reason for this unique behavior again goes back to God. ". . . That you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust." Our actions should never be dictated by the actions of others. That's not how God operates.

Paul takes this insight one step further. When he writes, the Jerusalem temple is still standing. The Roman army wouldn't destroy it until 70 CE - at least ten years after the Apostle's death. Jews could still enter those sacred precincts and celebrate Yahweh's very special presence in the Holy of Holies. But since Paul evangelized mostly Gentiles - non-Jews - the majority of those who read his letters couldn't go to Jerusalem and worship Yahweh in that holy place, even if they wanted to.

Paul's answer to their exclusion has become classic Christian theology, he tells the Corinthians, "You are the temple of God; . . . the Spirit of God dwells in you the temple of God, which you are, is holy."

Those who commit themselves to imitating God's holiness not only become other, they also become the presence of God in our midst. No need to go to a special, holy place to experience God among us. God is in our very selves.

Sirach never went that far. Though he encouraged his readers to share God's holiness, he still believed God's followers needed a temple. Of course, probably many of us have yet to go that far. If we did, and followed our Church's rubrics, we not only would have to genuflect in front of tabernacles, we'd also have to genuflect in front of one another.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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FOSIL, BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222

FEBRUARY 27, 2011: EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 49:14-15 1 Corinthians 4:1-5 Matthew 6:23-34

Out of all the fears we humans experience, research shows the greatest is the fear of being alone. Many of our other fears disappear or lessen when someone else is around sharing them with us.

We see this in our three Agony in the Garden passages. Jesus begs his companions to “stay awake” and be present to him as he’s experiencing great anxiety. He didn’t want to have to go through it alone; he simply needed several warm, awake bodies to share his pain that fateful night.

Today’s three readings are very significant for anyone who fears being alone.

Deutero-Isaiah echoes the fear of many Jews in the middle of the Babylonian Exile. “Yahweh has forsaken me; Yahweh has forgotten me.” If God abandons us, we’re really in trouble. That’s why Yahweh’s next words are so often repeated. “Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you.” Though we frequently don’t reflect on it, God’s closer to us than parents are to their children. God never wants us to live our faith alone.

This conviction is mirrored in the faith of Paul. Reading his seven authentic letters carefully we discover he often was left to fend for himself, especially when it came to his belief that Gentiles didn’t have to convert to Judaism before they converted to Christianity. As we know from Paul’s letter to the Galatians, even his good friend and fellow missionary, Barnabas, deserted him in Antioch when Peter and others in the community showed their disagreement with Paul’s theology and practice by refusing to eat meals with non-Jews. They didn’t share Paul’s belief that both Gentile-Christians and Jewish-Christians could be equal members of the Body of Christ. Even in the midst of his frequent “aloneness” on this issue, the Apostle is convinced the risen Jesus is so much a part of his unique ministry that he alone can judge him. Only the Christ knows what makes Paul tick. He’s always with him.

Matthew’s Jesus tells us exactly what to do to experience his risen presence. It all revolves around our focus in life. “You cannot serve two masters. You will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” Those who imitate Jesus must constantly concentrate on Jesus.

We can’t let ourselves be snookered into buying into someone else’s value system. “Do not worry about your life,” Jesus commands, “what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, the body more than clothing?”

Spiritual author John Shea once observed, “Jesus of Nazareth was concerned with answering just three questions: What do you want out of life? Where do you get it? How much does it cost?”

Jesus presumes his Sermon on the Mount followers want to live their lives to the fullest. That means they’ll have to acquire a different attitude toward life than most people around them have developed. In order to do so, they’ll have to give up the “goodies” which many judge to be the goal of human existence.

Those willing to achieve such a change in focus and make their service of others the centerpiece of their lives will not only live life on a deeper level, they’ll always have the risen Jesus as a companion. (Remember he once promised, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am in your midst.”) It’s just a matter of being willing to pay the price of living our lives as he lived his.

Though Jesus’ followers share the same fears all other humans experience, it would seem that being left alone by Jesus isn’t one of those fears.

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