

## SEPTEMBER 25, 2011: TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

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

Conversion is at the heart of biblical faith.

Many of us were formed in a catechism environment in which knowledge was highly valued. The one change our teachers expected of us was to know more this year about our faith than we knew last year. After all, this year's catechism was always thicker than last year's.

Our sacred authors certainly never put down intellectual knowledge, but when they speak about "knowing" anyone or anything, they presume we have much more than just a book knowledge of the person or thing. As Semites, they took for granted you only truly know what you've experienced.

That's why, when they speak about knowing God, they frequently bring up conversion. To know anyone implies you somehow understand his or her value system. Though you might not buy into it, you can at least appreciate how it explains that individual's actions and personality.

The biblical kicker is that our sacred authors presume we should not only appreciate God's value system, we should actually make it part of our own personality. They were convinced that ongoing conversion must be an essential element in our following of God.

More than 500 years before Jesus' birth, Yahweh demands that Ezekiel be committed to the possibility of conversion in those exiled Israelites to whom he prophesied. Though they, like some of us, are quite comfortable locking people into certain behavior patterns, there's always an opportunity to change even if we judge God "unfair" for providing that opportunity.

The interesting point of this particular pericope is that Yahweh permits someone to change in either direction: to become more or less like God. Conversion isn't just a one way street.

In perhaps the best-known passage in all of Scripture, Paul insists his community in Philippi acquire "the same attitude that is also in Christ Jesus." He's concerned that his recent converts will fall into the trap of "solipsism." Because their relationship with the risen Jesus has made them much more aware of their importance and dignity, the Apostle is worried they'll begin to make their needs and desires the norm instead of acknowledging and caring for the needs and desires of others.

As other Christs, Paul expects the Philippians to be "of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing. Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, looking out not for your own interests, but also for those of others."

The person, of course, who best exemplifies such a self-giving value system is Jesus. His lifestyle was the exact opposite of solipsism. Instead of making himself the norm, Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave . . . He humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." That's the attitude - the value system - of Christ Jesus.

The gospel Jesus presumes the conversion to such an outgoing frame of mind doesn't happen instantly, nor does it develop without lots of relapses. That seems to be why he has no problem associating with sinners. They seem to be the one group most willing to change and convert. Like the first son, they think over their original refusal to do the father's will. Jesus holds out hope that they, unlike the "good folk," will eventually convert enough to enter "the kingdom of God:" to experience God working in everything they do.

Perhaps our religion teachers should have given the best grades not to those who knew a lot, but to those who changed their value systems a lot.

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## OCTOBER 2, 2011: TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

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

All Scripture is written for a specific people of faith. Though our sacred authors often stress the dignity which faith brings, there are frequent warnings to that specific people that God can accomplish God's will without them, or even with another group of people.

Isaiah gives such a warning. Though he prophesies during the threat of Assyria's 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE invasion of the Promised Land, he directs most of his oracles not against the invaders, but against the Chosen People.

Often when we seek help for a personal problem, we deflect ownership of the problem by starting our conversation with, "I have a friend who ...." Yahweh employs the same technique, but for a totally different reason. God simply wants the Israelites to first judge this predicament from a human to human perspective. Only later will we find out the identity of the "friend" and the "vineyard."

No matter what the farmer does, the vineyard constantly produces "wild grapes," forcing him to eventually ask the rhetorical question, "What more was there to do for my vineyard that I had not done?" There's just one course of action left: "Take away its hedge, give it to grazing, break through its wall, let it be trampled!"

Though no one in the prophet's original audience could disagree with the owner's decision, it causes them to have second thoughts when he finally identifies the participants in this allegory. "The vineyard of Yahweh is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his cherished plant." Obviously Yahweh's not interested in grapes. "He looked for judgment, but see, bloodshed! For justice, but hark, the outcry!"

If the Assyrians are going to conquer Jerusalem, it's not because they have a superior army, but because the city's inhabitants have refused to relate to one another as Yahweh has commanded. Yahweh's justice and judgment will have to be attained without Jewish participation.

Given Jewish familiarity with Isaiah's vineyard story, I've no doubt certain individuals started to squirm when Matthew's Jesus confronts the "chief priests and elders of the people" with the words, "There was a landowner who planted a vineyard-----"

Jesus' allegory differs significantly from Isaiah's. Unlike the prophet, he zeroes in on the Jewish leaders, not the people. There's also an emphasis on what happens to the landowner's son; an element which Christians would have zeroed in on after Jesus' death and resurrection. But the end result is similar: "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit."

Though this is an obvious reflection on the unexpected phenomenon of Gentiles as Gentiles joining Christian communities, we must never forget that whenever Matthew points out the failings of Jewish leaders, it's his way of "gently" reminding his fellow Christian leaders of their own foibles.

At this point, he's warning those leaders not to develop the same mindset some of their Jewish predecessors developed, who actually believed they alone controlled God's presence and actions among us. For Jewish/Christians, the recent "Gentile invasion" demonstrated that God is in control of the faith to which they've committed themselves. To fight against this unexpected development would be to fight against God. They're the caretakers of faith, not the owners.

That's why Paul's closing remarks to the Christian community in Philippi are so important. They take us back to the roots of our faith. "Keep on doing what you have learned, received and heard and seen in me."

Unless we want to be "replaced" we must constantly return to the scriptural faith of those who first brought us the faith. It's one way we can be certain we're not spending our lives producing wild grapes.

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