

AUGUST 19, 2012: TWENTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Proverbs 9:1-6 Ephesians 5:15-20 John 6:51-58

Biblical wisdom isn't the ability to consistently win at Jeopardy.

When our sacred authors speak about a wise person, they're basically describing someone who is able to look at the world in which we live and both see and reflect on patterns in God's creation, patterns which eventually lead him or her to uncover patterns in God's actions in our lives. If, for instance, we see ants working against all odds to accomplish difficult tasks, then God must be working just as hard to accomplish good for us.

Of course, Scripture scholars constantly remind us that Scripture contains a "wisdom debate." Some authors, like the author of today's Proverbs passage, are convinced we can find such patterns. Others, like the author of Job, believe such patterns don't exist. For them, God can do whatever God wishes, for whom and wherever God wishes, in spite of our preconceived notions about God's behavior.

Like their Jewish ancestors in the faith, Christians also struggled to surface God's will and actions in their lives. Though they appreciated the insights of those authors who sided with today's Proverbs writer, they also were convinced that, through Jesus, God was leading them down roads for which there was no precedent. They quickly found themselves going through doors few people had dared open.

In the midst of such newness, the author of Ephesians follows his mentor, Paul's, lead, relying on Jesus' Spirit to help surface God's will. The writer's command is short and to the point: "Be filled with the Spirit." He presumes the Spirit is such an integral part of his readers' lives that they'll often find themselves ". . . addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual song, singing and playing to the Lord in (their) hearts, giving thanks always and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father." Faith isn't something they can turn on or off at will. It's their very life.

Although John's Jesus approaches this issue from a little bit different perspective, he basically agrees with our Ephesians writer. It's essential to the fourth evangelist's theology that we can be certain we're doing what God wants us to do in our everyday lives because there's no distinction between us and the risen Jesus. Those who carry on the ministry of Jesus have evolved into other Christs. Not only does Jesus' Spirit guarantee that unity, but the Eucharistic food and drink which he gives makes certain the two of us can never be separated. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood remain in me and I them. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also those who feed on me will have life because of me... Whoever eats this bread will live forever."

John carries this conviction even one step further: "... Unless you eat the flesh of the Son and Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you."

Considering the eternal implications of these words, it bothers me that many Christian denominations today rarely celebrate the Lord's Supper. Yet, as I often remind my students, it's not their fault. One need only read the minutes of the Council of Trent (1545) to discover some of the abuses which flourished in Roman Catholic Eucharistic celebrations before and during the Reformation. No wonder so many reformers wanted nothing to do with "the Mass."

Of course, John's Jesus simply presumed we'd all "do the Eucharist right." If we suspect we're not, it's certainly material for frequent, serious examinations of conscience.

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AUGUST 26, 2012: TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17,18b    Ephesians 5:21-32    John 6:60-69

My one-time seminary classmate, Dr. Bill Sears, recently prompted lots of discussion about child rearing. Time magazine's controversial May cover story on his work, writings and interviews opened the floodgates. After years of careful observation and research, Bill and his wife Martha concluded some of our old "tried and true" parenting techniques simply don't work. They weren't "producing" the kind of children we'd anticipated.

Since this is a commentary on Scripture, not child rearing, you'll have to check other sources for the Sears' opinions on the subject. But their work certainly dovetails with today's three readings.

It begins with Joshua's dramatic decision to "serve Yahweh." Finally entering the Promised Land after 40 years of wilderness wandering, the leader of the Israelites must make a choice. Who will be his family's God? They choose Yahweh. But it wasn't as simple as it might seem. We modern monotheists should carefully examine the reasons behind their choice.

It wasn't a matter of believing in God or not believing in God - of becoming atheists. Twelfth century BCE Israelites had dozens of gods to choose from. The text says they picked Yahweh over all the others because Yahweh had brought them freedom. (The idea of an afterlife wouldn't enter Jewish thought for another eleven centuries. They didn't choose Yahweh because Yahweh guaranteed they'd get to heaven one day.)

Scriptural salvation almost always revolves around this life, not the next. As Marcus Borg demonstrates in *Speaking Christian*, God (or Jesus) usually saves us by making this life better, by improving it's quality.

Even in today's gospel, Peter's response to Jesus' question about looking elsewhere for salvation - "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!" - must be heard in the context of John's theology. He's a proponent of "realized eschatology." He believes what we anticipate happening in the future is already taking place right here and now. As we've seen over just the last four weeks, John's Jesus often speaks about providing a life for his followers, a life they already experience now because of their faith in him, long before they go through the pearly gates. In other words, Peter's saying almost the same thing Joshua said centuries before. "We follow you because you make our lives free, meaningful and fulfilled."

This is where today's Ephesians reading comes in. The Pauline disciple responsible for this letter is also responsible for the controversial statement, "Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord." Where does he get this idea? The gospel Jesus never brought up the subject.

The writer obviously had different ideas about marriage relations than we have today. But we must see them in the context of his culture, not ours. Back then, most people thought wives who always obeyed their husbands were fortunate. They obviously were more fulfilled - had far less hassles - than those few who rashly challenged the will of their lord and master. Of course, that was also a culture which believed slaves were fortunate because they were slaves. Such individuals couldn't survive in this world if they were given their freedom. They need a master's constant care and protection in order to be fulfilled.

Fortunately through the centuries we've looked at human relations from different perspectives than they had in the first Christian century. We experience freedom and fulfillment on levels they could never have imagined. Once that happened, we had to change our behavior patterns.

Bill and Martha Sears are doing something parallel. They want us to look at child rearing from different perspectives. But, like the advice in Ephesians, we might have to wait awhile to see if it brings "salvation."

Roger Vermalen Karban

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