

JULY 27TH, 2014: SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

I Kings 3:5, 7-12 Romans 8:28-30 Matthew 13:44-52

It's clear from our four gospels that one of the original things which most attracted people to the faith of Jesus was the element of surprise.

That in itself isn't surprising. Jesus' basic stump speech revolved around proclaiming the presence of God's kingdom in our daily lives. He was convinced no matter who we were, where we were, or what we were doing, that God was working effectively in everyone and everything we encountered. That insight was powerful enough to force him eventually to shutter his Capernaum carpenter shop and embark on an itinerant preaching ministry, going town to town, synagogue to synagogue inviting others to reach that same level of faith.

That insight also led him to couch much of his proclamation about God's kingdom in parables; in a form of speech which, instead of adding new information to a person's store of knowledge, forced his listeners to change the way they processed knowledge itself. His goal was to retool the brains of his followers, encouraging them to look at people and things in a brand new way. Parables do this better than any other kind of speech. Amazing what one surfaces when one begins to look at "reality" from a new angle. People become more important than our personal rights; loving others more important than rules and regulations.

For the vast majority of Jesus' followers, the uncovering of God's kingdom among them was as much a surprise as finding a buried treasure or discovering the pearl for which someone had searched for a lifetime. It was a life-altering experience. Nothing or no one would ever be the same again.

Yet discovering God's kingdom doesn't take us out of the ordinary world which everyone experiences. Matthew presumes we'll have to wait until Jesus' Parousia before the contents of the "net of life" are separated into the "wicked" and the "righteous." In the meantime we have to live in the world we're dealt.

Of course we live in it with Solomon's "understanding heart," judging people and situations around us with eyes and ears which constantly surface God at work in that world. We're expected to be people who continually discover God's kingdom whenever we turn a new corner.

We presume Paul had this kingdom of God insight in the back of his mind when he dictated today's Roman's pericope. It plays an essential role in his conviction that "all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." But to what are we "called?" To go to church on Sunday? To send our kids to Catholic schools? To create a hierarchical church? To follow every aspect of canon law? The Apostle's answer includes none of the above.

Paul simply reminds the Christian community in Rome that we're to "conform (ourselves) to the image of (God's) Son." We, like he, are to commit ourselves to a quest to surface God working effectively among us. That's basically what it means to become "other Christs." That's the aspect of himself which this itinerant preacher expected his followers to imitate.

It's clear from the last verse of today's gospel that Matthew accepted that challenge. Just as Alfred Hitchcock frequently inserted himself in most of his movies, so Matthew inserts himself in his gospel. Scripture scholars presume he's "the scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven, (one) who like the head of the household brings from his storeroom both the new and the old." Jesus' followers are committed to adhering to the "old things" which he as a reformer preached. But they're also just as committed to discovering the daily newness of the risen Jesus breaking into their lives. Both are essential parts of the same faith.

AUGUST 3, 2014: EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 55:1-3 Romans 8:35, 37-39 Matthew 14:13-21

It's a shame many who listen to today's well-known gospel pericope won't get the message Matthew originally intended us to get. To hear what the evangelist expected us to hear, we must point out two frequently overlooked elements in this passage.

First, this miracle, like all gospel bread miracles, is about the Eucharist. (In John 6 Jesus even institutes the Eucharist during the miracle, not at the Last Supper.) It's the only miracle narrated in all four gospels – a total of six times. The early Christian community was convinced that what happened that day had something to do with their celebrations of the breaking of bread.

Second, Jesus doesn't feed the people; his disciples do. He only insists, "Give them some food yourselves," then blesses their small collection of bread and fish, and finally returns the paltry fare "to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the crowds." Because of his followers' generous sharing of their food, "all ate and were satisfied."

When Scripture scholars talk about a biblical Eucharist, they certainly don't have today's celebration of "Mass" in mind: an event in which a liturgically attired and officially ordained man enters a specially constructed "sacred space," and recites specific words over elements of bread and wine, transforming them into Jesus' body and blood.

We know from I Corinthians 11 that when Jesus' first followers gathered to celebrate the Lord's Supper they simply shared a potluck meal during which their recognition of themselves and one another as the body of Christ also caused them to recognize the risen Jesus in the bread and wine they consumed. This recognition only happened because they died enough to become one with everyone around them. They literally gave themselves on various levels to one another.

The heart of a biblical Eucharist doesn't lie in special words or special people reciting them, it revolves around a special giving of themselves by all who participate in this exceptional meal. That's why today's gospel Jesus is forced to overcome his disciples' logical complaint that they don't have enough to share.

That leads us to the next question: what do any of us have that we can share with others during the Lord's Supper? The vast majority of us aren't professional theologians, musicians or counselors, and since we no longer participate in a potluck meal, we can't even share our favorite recipes.

It would be helpful if our parishes at least had dialogue homilies and open Prayers of the Faithful. But no liturgical regulation can stop us from being totally open to all around us. Those who receive such a personal, generous gift know what Deutero-Isaiah is talking about when he quotes Yahweh encouraging those "who are thirsty to come to the water! You who have no money, come, receive grain and eat!" There's no charge. We have no idea what basic needs we fulfill when we simply give ourselves enough to make all feel welcome.

No wonder Paul is so convinced that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. He knew nothing can separate us from the love of the Body of Christ, present and giving during the Eucharist.