

SEPTEMBER 4TH, 2016: TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Wisdom 9:13-18b Philemon 9-10, 12-17 Luke 14:25-33

One of the shortest books in the Christian Scriptures packs one of the biggest wallops. Paul's letter to Philemon isn't long enough to have chapters, yet its message has challenged Christians for almost 2,000 years.

The Apostle was faced with a unique problem when he dictated these few lines and mailed them to his old friend, a problem with which none of us today (hopefully) will ever have to deal: a runaway slave. Onesimus, Philemon's slave, had not only escaped from his master's house after destroying some of his property, but eventually he ran to Paul, expecting the Apostle to protect him. Does he keep him or return him? The problem becomes even more complicated when Onesimus converts to Christianity and Paul baptizes him.

Obviously our faith had not yet evolved to the point where slavery, as such, would be unconditionally prohibited. (That wouldn't happen for about another 1,800 years!) That's why it's important to note the principles Paul employs to come to a conclusion. He couldn't just check the latest papal documents or look up some conciliar decrees. He didn't even have a catechism to flip through to find the answer.

It's clear that he basically agrees with the Wisdom author that our first moral principle is always to do "what Yahweh intends." But as we hear in today's reading, at times that's hard to do. "Scarce do we guess the things on earth . . .," the author reflects, "but when things are in heaven, who can search them out?" Such certainty can come only from Yahweh's holy spirit. Without that force in our daily lives, the paths of those on earth could never be made straight.

Luke's Jesus presumes we must be completely committed to that spirit. Nothing – or no one – can be more important than that commitment, not even life itself. And it's certainly not something that comes easy. It can take as much planning as building a tower or waging a war. We simply can't be other Christs without it. There's no other way to daily carry our cross.

Perhaps the first principle Paul operates from is Jesus' – and modern moral theologians' - belief that whatever we do, we do freely. Things done from force or fear don't count toward our eternal salvation. As difficult as it might to achieve such freedom, the Apostle expects both Philemon and Onesimus to have no force or fear in whatever they do. That means he first respectfully asks Philemon to free Onesimus and permit him to help Paul. But on the other hand, he also expects Onesimus to freely return to his former owner and permit himself to again be in his power before he asks for his release. In each case, Philemon could freely say, "No!" just as Onesimus could freely say, "I'm not going back!"

Since this letter is in our biblical canon, we presume both said yes. But there's no way to definitively prove that. It's an essential part of carrying our cross that we create situations in which people are free to do the unpredictable. With such a commitment to freedom it was only a matter of (a long) time before slavery would be condemned by the church.

But Paul is also guided by his belief that, once baptized, we each become a new creation. So according to his theology, Onesimus is just as much a free person as Philemon, and Philemon is just as much a slave as Onesimus. We're all one.

Perhaps one of the reasons we're more comfortable in just following rules and regulations instead of making decisions based on Christian principles is that there's much less personal dying in the rules and regulation. Someone else already made the decision for us.

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SEPTEMBER 11TH, 2016: TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14 I Timothy 1:12-17 Luke 15:1-32

If the majority of our biblical books weren't self-critical they wouldn't be in the Bible. One of the reasons people of faith saved these writings was because they helped them reflect on their own weaknesses. If we're not willing to be analyzed, we probably shouldn't read Scripture.

Yet, because our sacred authors didn't have us in mind when they wrote, it's easy to miss some of the self-critical aspects of their writings. This is especially true of today's first reading.

As with all biblical writings we must know what was going on in the community when the writing was actually composed, not what was going on during the period the work describes. For instance, today we shouldn't be asking about Egyptian calf gods during the 12th century BCE – the period of the Exodus. Serious students of Scripture want to know what was going on “calf-wise” in 8th century BCE Israel, where and when today's Exodus passage was actually created.

Hosea, prophesying in Israel during that time, twice mentions problems with calves – 8:4-6, & 13:2 – demanding that Samaria “cast (their) calves away” and condemning men for “throwing kisses to calves.” Scholars tell us that Hosea's calves are actually cherubim set up as symbols of Yahweh's presence in various Jewish shrines and temples. A cherub is a mythological animal: head of a human, wings of an eagle and body of a bull – hence the derisive term “calf.” It was presumed gods got from point A to point B on their backs. And when they got there, they would sit enthroned astride them. So, for Jews, making and putting a cherub in a sacred place was an outward sign Yahweh was in that place. (Sort of like a sanctuary candle is a Catholic sign Jesus is present in the tabernacle.) The Ark of the Covenant even sported two cherubs. But, due to bad catechesis, many Jews eventually began to believe the cherub actually was Yahweh; they began to worship the statue, even blowing kisses to it.

Prophets, like Hosea, didn't tolerate such practices. They blew off the argument that the cherubs originally came from the priests – Aaron in this case. The idolatrous “calves” had to go. They were drawing people from true faith. The original readers would have known this Exodus story was directed to what they were doing in 8th century Israel, not to what their ancestors had done 400 years before in the Sinai. They had created the golden calves in the shrines they frequented.

In a similar way, Luke's original readers automatically knew the key person in Jesus' Prodigal Son parable is the unforgiving older brother. Throughout Luke/Acts, Luke's Jesus constantly conveys God's mercy to individuals who have no legitimate claim to such mercy. In each of today's three parables, Jesus' God seems to have no problem with forgiving. We, not God, are the obstacles to that process. Rarely does anyone ever criticize us for “welcoming and eating with sinners.” Perhaps we other Christs need more forgiveness than the sinners in our midst.

The Pauline disciple who wrote I Timothy doesn't hesitate to point out his mentor's shortcomings: blasphemer, persecutor, arrogant. Fortunately, the Apostle reminds the readers, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Of these I am the foremost.” Who, hearing these words, would not immediately think of his or her own unworthiness to carry on Jesus' ministry? Yet, each can testify, “I was mercifully treated.”

Of course, just as we critically applied Luke and I Timothy's passages to ourselves, we can do likewise with the Exodus pericope. What golden calves have we as a church created through the centuries? Thankfully the risen Jesus, not the church will judge us at the pearly gates.

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