

AUGUST 5, 2012: EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15 Ephesians 4:17, 20-24 John 6:24-35

If you can't identify with a particular sacred author's theology, I'd advise you to read on. There's a good chance you'll eventually encounter another writer who espouses a contradictory point of view, one which better mirrors your own experience.

The 8th century prophet Hosea, for instance, encouraged his Israelite community to regard their ancestors' 40 year wilderness trek to the Promised Land as a honeymoon experience; a time when Yahweh and Yahweh's people were intimately getting to know one another, an event of love and devotion.

On the other hand, the 10th century Yahwistic author who penned today's Exodus pericope is well-known for looking at that same experience as a testing period; a time when those recently freed slaves met obstacle after obstacle during their wanderings. And they usually failed the test. Instead of accepting those set-backs as God-sent opportunities to deepen their faith in Yahweh's care and concern, they constantly grumbled and complained against Moses, Aaron and Yahweh. In today's reading, they're willing to exchange their newfound freedom for a hot meal back in Egypt!

Yahweh temporarily solves their problem by sending them manna from heaven; probably not as exceptional an event as it once seemed. Many Scripture scholars today presume the "original" manna was simply the overnight secretion of insects on rocks and vegetation in the Sinai wilderness. Though not very appetizing, desert Bedouins long ago discovered it would keep them alive in a pinch.

If these scholars are correct, Moses' statement that the manna ". . . is the bread that Yahweh has given you to eat" is a theological interpretation of a natural, daily occurrence. People without faith in Yahweh would certainly have regarded manna from a completely different perspective.

John's Jesus continues the interpretation process in today's gospel pericope, comparing his feeding to Moses' feeding. And, as usual for John, Jesus is always "one up" on anything in the Hebrew Scriptures. "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst." Eating Jesus' body and drinking his blood is certainly more satisfying and longer lasting than the food and drink Yahweh provided in the wilderness. Jesus offers his followers food "that endures for eternal life."

Yet, no matter how we interpret the Israelites' Sinai experience or our Christian Eucharist, the Pauline disciple responsible for Ephesians hits on an essential point for all who are committed to carry on the risen Jesus' ministry: each of us must "learn Christ." We must gradually acquire a new value system - the frame of mind which the gospel Jesus so frequently demonstrates in his words and actions.

The sacred author presumes no one comes into this world equipped with the mind of Jesus. "You must put away the old self of your former way of life, corrupted through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth."

Though our biblical writers certainly provide us with different theological interpretations of events, all Christian authors constantly zero in on Jesus' "righteousness:" his constant love and concern for others. And they faithfully remind us that those who imitate Jesus' righteousness are "holy:" they're distinct from people around them.

Our Christian sacred authors don't necessarily expect their readers to be Scripture scholars, experts in recognizing and knowing each one's theological idiosyncrasies. But they certainly expect us to recognize and imitate Jesus' frame of mind, no matter how long it takes.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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AUGUST 12, 2012: NINETEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

I Kings 19:4-8 Ephesians 4:30-5:2 John 6:41-51

Today's first reading can be completely misinterpreted if one reads just the liturgical selection and doesn't know what came before and what will happen later. Especially in the context of John 6 in which Jesus is speaking about feeding us with his body, the bread of life, it appears that Yahweh feeding Elijah on his journey simply prefigures Jesus feeding us in the Eucharist. But it's not quite that simple.

Elijah has just won a duel with the prophets of Ba'al on Mt. Carmel, in Israel's far north. According to the rules of the encounter, he executed the defeated prophets, something which didn't go over well with Queen Jezebel who basically paid their salaries. When she notifies Elijah that he doesn't have long to live, he does what any sane man would do in the face of an angry woman: he runs.

Traveling the length of the country, he ends up in Beersheba, on the Sinai border, as far south as one can travel and still be in the Holy Land. Today's first reading kicks in at this point.

Ignoring the prophet's wish, Yahweh doesn't let him die. Instead, an angel twice supplies him with food and water, eventually enabling him to walk "forty days and forty nights to the mountain of Cod, Horeb (Sinai)."

The story certainly brings out God's care of God's prophets. There's just one problem: when Elijah finally arrives at Mt. Sinai, Yahweh tells him he shouldn't be there! God sends him back north with the mission to rid the country of Jezebel. With Yahweh's help, Elijah's walked hundreds of miles out of his way.

The great Hans Walter Wolff once pointed out that many of God's disciples yearn for death. Like Elijah, they eventually get fed up with all the opposition they face. "Sometimes," the famous Scripture scholar mentioned, "the death they seek simply revolves around giving up the struggle their ministry entails. Though they still seem to go through the externals, they've already given up the fight."

The irony of today's first reading is that God still strengthens God's followers to continue to fight, even when they're going in the wrong direction.

The author of Ephesians is convinced no one imitates God in a vacuum. As God's disciples, we're constantly dealing with real flesh and blood people and situations. Naturally there should be no "bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, or reviling" in our relationships. But when it comes to being "kind, compassionate and forgiving" to those around us, how do we know we're always doing what God expects us to do? There's no one action that always, everywhere, shows love to everyone. I presume, with the help of God, we often go in the wrong direction. No wonder some of us want to give up the struggle.

Perhaps John's Jesus provides us with the best insight in the midst of this confusion. "Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life."

We're not in the faith business because we're confident of achieving good results. Our failures are often more rewarding than our successes, especially if in those failures we've faithfully tried to go where we think God wanted us to go. If we really believe each of us is being "taught by God," we have to presume there's going to be lots of hit and miss. How can any human completely know God's will?

That's why I'm grateful God gave us biblical people like Elijah to reflect on and not catechism questions and answers to memorize. Somehow the certainty which catechisms are supposed to supply just doesn't correspond to the real life situations in which we struggle to live our faith.

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