

JULY 28, 2013: SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Genesis 18:20-32 Colossians 2:12-14 Luke 11:1-13

In many ways, today's first reading is just a continuation of last week's message on hospitality. Scripture scholars are convinced the "outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah" concerns, not the practice of same sex actions, but the community's refusal to offer hospitality to strangers, epitomized by the inhospitable treatment of Yahweh's two "messengers." (Actually, as we saw last week, the divine pair is simply Yahweh in human form.) The townsfolk's demand to have "intimacies" with Lot's visitors simply points out their desire to engage even strangers in forbidden fertility cults. We know they're not homosexuals in our sense of the term, else Lot wouldn't have suggested sending his two daughters out to them.

But, besides being hospitable to strangers, Abraham and his extended family are also known to possess other characteristics which the Genesis author's community should try to emulate, especially the ability to negotiate prices. In a world in which modern stores and modern pricing systems didn't exist, almost every daily purchase involved some kind of haggling. Jews, proud of their ability to pull this off better than anyone else, could always fall back on the example of Abraham, the first Jew. No one but this greatest of patriarchs could get Yahweh to drop a price of fifty down to ten. Whenever later Israelites got the upper hand in making a purchase, they were just following in his humongous footsteps.

Yet, there's much more to this pericope than just Abraham's ability to barter with God. The verses which immediately precede today's liturgical passage speak about Yahweh's unique relationship with Abraham. Because of that, God can't hide things from him which can be kept from others.

This special relationship between us and God is also the theme of our other two readings. In some sense, it's so special that we don't even have to negotiate with God about the things we want.

Luke's Jesus assures us, "... Everyone who asks receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened." Though most of us know how to pester friends until they eventually give us what we want, we don't have to use such tactics with God.

In this shorter - but more original - form of the "Lord's Prayer," Jesus tells his followers to look at God as their Father. Yet he/she's not a normal parent. This caring person is "hallowed:" so "other" that we can't ever surface any metaphors to adequately describe her/him. Father simply highlights just one part of God's unique personality: God relating to us as loved children. This implies God gives us what we need, forgives our failings, and doesn't "put us to the test." The best way we show we're actually children of such a God is by treating others in the same way.

If we have any doubt we're God's children, we need only reflect on our relationship with Jesus, God's son. Just how close are the two of us? The author of Colossians perfectly sums it up. "You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead." Lest any of us think we're not worthy to be one with the risen Jesus, the writer reminds us, "Even when you were dead in transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, he brought you to life with him, having forgiven us all our transgressions...."

Not only is the risen Jesus a new creation, so are those who imitate him/her. We'll never be that "old person" again. How are we to relate to a God who never looks at us as strangers?

AUGUST 4, 2013: EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:21-23 Colossians 3:1-5,9-11 Luke 12:13-21

This weekend we're introduced to Scripture's classic curmudgeon, Qoheleth. Though this author of Ecclesiastes is a believing Jew, he isn't a fan of some of the other authors of the Hebrew Scriptures. He's especially critical of any writer who claims that Yahweh always rewards the good and punishes the evil in this life. According to his observations, such a naive theological statement simply isn't backed up by the facts.

As an example of this false reward/punishment reasoning he presents "... one who has labored with wisdom and knowledge and skill, and yet to another who has not labored over it, he must leave his property.....What profit comes to us from all the toil and anxiety of heart with which we have labored under the sun?" No wonder he concludes, "All things are vanity!" In other words, since there's little value to anything we do in life, we might as well enjoy it while we can.

In many ways the historical Jesus could have identified with Qoheleth. He also wanted his followers to truthfully reflect on the world around them. Like the author of Ecclesiastes, he points out in today's gospel pericope how ridiculous it is to spend one's whole life acquiring wealth when, in a split second, all your money and all your possessions could be ripped out of your hands by death.

As a first step in surfacing God's kingdom around us, Jesus warns his imitators, "Take care to guard against all greed, for though one may be rich, one's life does not consist of possessions." We should never "... store up treasures for (ourselves), but (should become) rich in what matters to God."

Just what makes us "rich in what matters to God?" The author of our Colossians passage provides us with at least an entry level answer to that question.

Following the insights of Paul, his mentor, the writer reminds his community, "... You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory."

What parts of us are to die? Those that are "earthly: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and the greed that is idolatry." Among other things, we're to "... stop lying to one another." We should never be ashamed to let people see us as we are, especially since we've "... taken off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed for knowledge, in the image of its creator."

Instead of trying to amass material wealth, we're, as followers of the risen Jesus, now expected to amass relationships; relationships which help us become one with all around us. In the new world we're creating, "... There is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythians, slave, free; but Christ is all and in all." (Too bad he left out Paul's Galatians 3 further sign of unity: "neither male nor female." We then would have more than one text to fall back on when we insist on the equality between men and women.)

Other Christs would agree that Qoheleth's pessimistic observation of the world was right on - as far as it went. Yet, they dare to go one step further. If one looks only at this world without a vision of what this world can become, then life is useless. But if, as Jesus taught and lived, one looks at this world as a place in which God is embedded in everything and everyone, not only people and things around us, but also our own lives are transformed into the most terrific experience a person could have.