

AUGUST 25, 2013: TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 66:18-21 Hebrews 12:5-7,11-13 Luke 13:22-30

Most of us dread to hear the word "discipline." It conjures up images of restriction. It limits our behavior and creates a narrow lifestyle. Even if it comes from God, we still cringe at its mention. What's worse, the author of today's Hebrews pericope pulls no punches.

"My child, do not disdain the discipline of the Lord or lose heart when reproved by him, for whom the Lord loves, he disciplines, he scourges every child he acknowledges." It reminds me of the famous comment of St. Theresa of Avila to God, "If this is how you treat your friends, it's no wonder you have so many enemies." We have enough problems with human discipline; we certainly don't need God stepping into the picture.

Yet, God's biblical discipline is a unique process. Contrary to most human conditioning, it prepares us to habitually open up, to shed the limits which restrict most people's thoughts and behavior. We clearly see this new type of freeing discipline in our other two readings.

One of Third-Isaiah's major tasks is to get the former Babylonian captives to return to the Promised Land. Though the Persians had conquered the Babylonians and permitted the Israelite exiles to go back home, the majority eventually decided to stay in Babylon. Jerusalem was just a heap of ruins. They didn't want to spend the rest of their lives rebuilding the city.

The prophet agrees that if Yahweh's chosen people are concerned only with their own well-being, they'd be better off staying put. But if they're interested in playing a role in God's plan for the whole world, they have an obligation to return and rebuild Jerusalem. The "Yahweh-disciplined" must always break through their narrow mindedness and look at the world as God looks at it, including Yahweh's outside-the-envelope mentality in their decision. Contrary to their limited world-view, they follow a God who includes non-Jews in his/her plans. Their actions will determine whether some of those Gentiles will become followers of Yahweh or remain devotees of other gods.

"I come," Yahweh announces, "to gather nations of every language; they shall come and see my glory. I will set a sign among them ...." But for that event to happen, the Gentiles must have a special place to come to: Jerusalem. Yahweh's people and Yahweh's city will be a sign of Yahweh's global plan for the salvation of non-Jews. God's disciples must always be trained to think big - real big.

Luke's Jesus is working from the same frame of mind when he encourages his followers to "enter through the narrow gate." Ironically, for Jesus and his imitators the narrow gate is always the gate of broad-mindedness. When someone asks him about the number of people who will be saved, Jesus answers with a statement about the kind of people who will be saved. Obviously a lot of the "good folk" are going to be on the outside looking in at people they never thought had a chance at salvation. "People will come from the east and the west and from the north and the south and will recline at table in the kingdom of God." Meanwhile, a lot of those who thought salvation was an iron-clad cinch will be "wailing and grinding their teeth," completely shocked they haven't been invited to the big event.

Perhaps the best way to discipline ourselves according to God's method is to constantly remind ourselves of Jesus' last statement in today's pericope. "Behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last." It's an exceptional, no holds barred way of looking at reality.

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SEPTEMBER 1, 2013: TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Sirach 3:17-18,20,28-29 Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24a Luke 14:1, 7-14

The worst label the gospel Jesus ever gave anyone was "hypocrite." Certainly wasn't a bad title in itself. Even today many of us anxiously await the yearly ceremony in which commemorative statues are given to the prior year's best movie hypocrites: the Academy Awards. The word simply describes an actor or actress: technically, someone who makes a living pretending to be someone they're not.

Jesus wants those committed to imitating him to be real, honest people, individuals comfortable in their own God-made skin, men and women who could symbolically shed the masks worn by actors in the first third of the first century CE to hide their actual identity. This seems to be one of the reasons Matthew's chapter 23 Jesus was so uptight about his followers accepting honorary titles or putting on distinctive clothes. Nothing should get in the way of another Christ being his or her real self. It's in our real self that the real risen Jesus is embedded - not in the false selves we've created for our performances.

The unknown author of the letter to the Hebrews wants his readers to appreciate the special perks they have as followers of Jesus. They don't have to have participated in the Exodus or been present at the foot of Mt. Sinai when Yahweh covenanted with the Chosen People. They've symbolically made a new covenant with Yahweh through Jesus, an agreement which tops anything their faith ancestors experienced. Yet they've done this not in a sacred place or during a sacred time. Their everyday lives have become sacred - "other." The risen Jesus has transformed them into a sacred people, just as they are. No need to pretend they're someone they're not. Their actual identity is much more significant than any hypocritical personality they assume.

Centuries before Jesus' birth, the author of Sirach already understood the value of simply being oneself, especially in our relations with others, and in particular in our relations with God. "My child, conduct your affairs with humility, and you will be loved more than a giver of gifts. Humble yourself the more, the greater you are, and you will find favor with God." The writer presumed that when we look in a mirror, what we see is what we get, and God gave it to us.

Of course, in today's gospel passage, Jesus presumes what we see in others also comes from God, even when we regard those others as inferior to ourselves. He warns, "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted." The way we serve others will always be an outward sign we've taken off our masks.

I'll never forget December 17, 1964: the day of my "first Mass." But one of the reasons I most remember isn't because of what I did, but because of something Bob Burton, my classmate, did. He rented a bus, rounded up all the beggars in the vicinity of Rome's Janiculum hill, and treated them to a terrific meal after his own first Mass. Unlike most of us priests on that special day, he made others the focus of attention, not himself. Besides never again having to pay the "hill tax" when he walked from and to the North American College, Bob also helped the rest of us look at those "unfortunate" individuals in a new light. They were important because Bob showed us their importance.

Some of us later remarked, "Wish I'd thought of that. No one will ever forget his first Mass." We'd all encountered the same beggars every day, but only he treated them like friends, not beggars.

I wonder where he got such a strange idea.

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