

SEPTEMBER 8, 2013: TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

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

Biblical people of faith are expected to commit themselves to the unknown, to give themselves over for an entire lifetime to something and someone they can't totally understand.

The Wisdom author supplies us with the obvious reason for this unique commitment. "Who can know God's counsel, or who can conceive what Yahweh intends? For the deliberations of mortals are timid, and unsure are our plans." Those who give themselves over to God are in for a wild ride. That's why we should be certain we understand what we're buying into before we ever enter into such an agreement.

The gospel Jesus certainly didn't want his followers to blindly imitate his commitment to Yahweh, and then politely bow out once they discovered all its implications. "Which of you," he asks, "wishing to construct a tower does not first sit down and calculate the cost... ? Or what king, marching into battle, would not first sit down and decide...?"

This Galilean carpenter isn't interested in construction techniques or military strategies. He's simply concerned with how dedicated his followers are to becoming other Christs. As today's passage states, neither family relations nor possessions can block the road he and his disciples travel to Jerusalem: the place where both he and his followers will die and rise.

None of Luke's readers could be certain where his or her personal Jerusalem would be, or what exact death they would have to endure. That was part of the suffering they were expected to experience. They were to say, "Yes!" before they knew the price.

It's clear from our Philemon pericope that this Christian slave owner had no idea of all the implications of his commitment to the risen Jesus. Paul was expecting him to go down a road he'd never before traveled.

This shortest of Paul's seven authentic letters deals with a touchy subject. Onesimus, one of Philemon's slaves had not only escaped and sought protection from Paul, he had "wreaked some havoc" in fleeing from his master's house. Philemon obviously expects the slave's immediate return and payment for the damages.

But the Apostle reminds his former convert that, because of his unique relationship with the risen Christ, he now has a unique relationship with everyone around him, even Onesimus. He's "no longer a slave, but more than a slave, a brother" I seriously wonder if, before now, Philemon understood this exact implication of being another Christ. Though Paul's in no way a 19th century abolitionist, he's certainly laying the groundwork for those who believed all slavery should be abolished.

Yet Paul doesn't want to force Philemon's hand. He expects him to freely release the slave and permit him to become his servant. If one freely commits oneself to God's will, then all the other actions which are a daily part of that commitment must also be free. Paul has a unique way of guaranteeing that freedom for both the slave owner and the slave. The letter carrier doesn't have to ask for directions to Philemon's house. Onesimus himself will deliver the letter requesting his freedom!

If Onesimus is free enough to put himself back into Philemon's hands, will Philemon freely hand him over to Paul? We presume he did - else this letter wouldn't have been saved.

But at the same time, we can't but notice the new areas in which both the slave and master have been led because of their faith in the risen Jesus. Each could have echoed the Wisdom author's rhetorical question, "Who knows what God intends?"

Perhaps all people of faith, especially we Catholics, should still be asking that same question today.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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SEPTEMBER 15, 2013: TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

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

Our faith is rooted in the ability of people to change their value systems.

The Pauline disciple responsible for I Timothy perfectly sums up the Christian situation: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Of these, I am the foremost." Those committed to becoming other Christs are not only expected to go through constant periods of repentance, they're also expected to encourage and rejoice over that same repentance in others.

This obviously is the reason Luke's Jesus tells three parables about finding the "lost" in today's gospel pericope. The first two - the lost sheep and coin - are generic enough that most in the evangelist's community can nod and say, "Yep! That makes sense." But the third is so concrete that it must have created some problems. When it comes to actually welcoming a specific, lost person back into the community, we might have to stop and talk about it. It has a lot of challenging implications.

Of course, the "prodigal" person in the story isn't the younger son; it's the father. He goes completely overboard in receiving his wasteful son back into his good graces. So overboard that the older son instinctively starts to calculate what his father's generosity is costing him.

Once the boy demanded his father give him his half of the inheritance, the remainder of the inheritance belonged to his brother. That means the finest robe and ring his father had so quickly bestowed on this recently returned scoundrel was actually his, not to mention the fatted calf that was being quickly devoured. His father's only excuse for giving away part of his inheritance was a simple, "... Your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found."

I presume Luke was aware of some resentment in his gospel community over how easily and generously it reinstated repentant sinners. We don't have that exact problem today. Once the "confessional" stipulations with which we're all familiar came into existence, the sinner is expected to go through specific institutional hoops before we kill the fatted calf. It makes us good folk feel a little better to know that we who've never left the farm have an easier, less complicated path to salvation.

Scripture scholars frequently remind us that the triggering device for today's Exodus golden calf passage wasn't the behavior of recently freed slaves in the Sinai during their 13th century BCE exodus. Rather it was the behavior of 8th century BCE Israelites toward the cherub statues set up in their Yahweh shrines. These mythological creatures usually sported the body of a bull, the wings of an eagle and the head of a human. (The well-known Egyptian Sphinx is a variant, having a lion's body.) It was believed that the gods employed them for transportation and enthronement. Priests put them in Jewish shrines (and on the top of the Ark of the Covenant) to assure the faithful that Yahweh was really present in those places. The problem is that, after a while, some people thought these "bulls" actually were Yahweh, and began to worship them, believing the "calf," not Yahweh, had brought them out of Egypt.

Each of today's three sacred authors is insistent that we cut through the "institutional accretions" that are part of any organized religion, and return to the basics of faith. Yahweh's offer of freedom is at the center of Jewish faith; Jesus' offer of forgiveness is at the center of Christian faith. Any cries of "injustice" by those who don't think they need to repent is simply a sign they should be the first sinners in line to receive God and the church's forgiveness.

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