

AUGUST 20TH, 2017: TWENTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7 Romans 11:13-15, 29-32 Matthew 15:21-28

Many of us have never noticed that Paul of Tarsus employs Tom Sawyer methodology in his evangelization of his fellow Jews. Yet he's perfectly clear about it in today's Roman's passage. "Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles," the Apostle confesses, "I glory in my ministry in order to make my race jealous and thus save some of them."

Mark Twain's hero finagles his friends into whitewashing a fence by pretending to enjoy his work so much that they eventually beg him to let them do it. In similar way, Paul tells the church in Rome that the basic reason he's preaching the risen Jesus to non-Jews is to make Jews so jealous that they'll beg him to convert them also. Once they see how Gentiles' lives are changed for the better by living the faith of Jesus, simple jealousy will drive them to demand to know about that same faith.

It's somewhat embarrassing to us Gentiles to discover we weren't originally Paul's priority. He only turned to us because of his dedication to his fellow Jews. After they rejected his message, he had no other choice. He felt forced to demonstrate that Jesus' way to salvation actually worked by ingeniously having non-Jews show Jews that it worked. Though many of us falsely presume the gospel Jesus rejected Judaism in favor of Christianity, Paul couldn't be clearer. "The gifts and the call of God are irrevocable . . . You (Gentiles) have now received mercy because of their (the Jews') disobedience . . ." But eventually, in spite of their disobedience, they also will receive mercy.

Matthew's Jesus also is clear about the Gentile/Jew issue. When, in today's pericope, a Gentile woman asks him to cure her possessed daughter, he initially refuses, stating, "I was sent only for the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In other words, "You Gentiles don't fit into my job description."

Jesus eventually cures the girl – triggered by one of the best comebacks in all of Scripture – but he never says he's changed his priorities. Though open to non-Jews, he plans on reforming Judaism, not replacing it.

He's not alone in that pursuit. He has some rather well-known predecessors, including Third-Isaiah, the author of today's first reading. Active shortly after Israel's 6th century BCE Babylonian Exile, this open-minded, reforming prophet actually envisions a day when Gentiles, adhering to the Mosaic Law, will participate in Jewish rituals. But as far as we can tell, to offer "burnt offerings and sacrifices," these non-Jews will have to convert to Judaism. (Something many early Christians also expected of Gentiles who converted to Christianity.)

Paul of Tarsus is unique. He's convinced we follow not the historical but the risen Jesus; the Jesus who is neither slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile, male nor female. We don't have to be free, Jewish males to be other Christs. Even Gentile, female slaves can make that transformation. In Paul's "liberal" theology, Gentiles can be Christians without first converting to Judaism. It's those Gentile Christians whom he presumes will make his fellow Jews jealous enough to also become other Christs.

Just one problem. I personally know of no Jew who, during my lifetime, converted to Christianity. Very few ever do. We've traditionally blamed Jews for that situation, at one time even liturgically referring to them as "perfidious." Yet, following Paul's theology, we Gentile Christians are the ones to blame. If Jews haven't converted in large numbers to the faith of Jesus, it's our fault. We haven't lived our faith intensely enough to make them jealous.

Embarrassing as it might be, we non-Jewish Christians might be perfidious, not them. We're the ones who've betrayed Jesus' faith. The proof is in our non-kosher pudding.

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AUGUST 27TH, 2017: TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 22:19-23 Romans 11:33-36 Matthew 16:13-20

I've often said that someone who can listen to the William Tell Overture and not think of the Lone Ranger is a true aficionado of classical music. Likewise, anyone who can listen to Matthew 16:18 – “You're the rock and on this rock I'm going to build my church.” – and not think of the Roman Catholic papacy, is a true Scripture scholar. We've employed this text for so long as the main proof text for our hierarchical structure that for all practical purposes Matthew's real message has been completely lost.

The main problem is that we take today's gospel passage out of its original context of a first century CE Jewish/Christian community and put it into a twenty-first century church CE institution. When Matthew originally penned these lines, he still seems to have believed Jesus would return very shortly in the Parousia. He wasn't concerned with setting up a “program for the ages,” but in addressing problems his readers were experiencing then and there. Among those difficulties was the role of Jesus of Nazareth in the lives of Jewish/Christian believers. For the evangelist, this former Galilean carpenter was more than just one more Jewish prophet in a long line of Jewish prophets like Elijah or Jeremiah.

“You're the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Peter states. The risen Jesus whom Christians follow is not only the Messiah for which Jews longed for centuries, but he/she shares in Yahweh's divinity.

As we know from Paul of Tarsus, our earliest Christian author, Jesus' disciples could only stand in awe once they discovered the uniqueness of this itinerant preacher. God had done things through him that no person of faith could have anticipated. “How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways!” Paul reminds the Romans, in today's second reading, that no one could have predicted what had happened between 6 BCE and 30 CE, and was still happening with the risen Jesus in their midst. We can only give God glory for his/her intervention through Jesus.

Of course, the Chosen People were certain Yahweh had already personally worked in their history. Isaiah gives us an example of such an occurrence in our first reading. The prophet presumes it was Yahweh – and not just politics - who had replaced Shebna with Eliakim as “master of the palace” in 8th century BCE Judah. God never hesitated to get involved in everyday Jewish life.

Matthew is convinced that same divine involvement carries over into his day and age, especially through Jesus and those who follow him. Simon's rock solid faith in Jesus' divinity has transformed him into a rock for the early Christian community. This poor fisherman's belief in Jesus' uniqueness is the rock on which that church has been built. And just as traditional Pharisaic teachers and lawyers could interpret the Mosaic Law in ways respected and binding “in heaven and on earth,” so Peter and those with faith in the risen Jesus now share in that same ministry for the new People of God. (Contrary to popular belief, this power has nothing to do with who gets into heaven and who doesn't.)

Through the centuries many of us Catholics seem to have actually put more faith in some of the authority figures in our church than we've put in the risen Jesus. Especially during this year commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we have to thank Fr. Martin Luther for trying to at least partially return us to that biblical faith.

But the struggle continues. After 2,000 years we're still fighting against “the gates of the netherworld,” trusting the gospel Jesus' promise that if we constantly fall back on our faith in him, the forces of evil will never prevail - even forces within the church.

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