

MARCH 31ST, 2019: FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT
Joshua 5:9a, 10-12 II Corinthians 5:17-21 Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Those - like Jesus of Nazareth - who employ parables when they teach have a deliberate, specific agenda. For such people parables are more than just cute, memorable little stories. By integrating them into their teaching, they're revealing their unique mentality.

Parables only come into play when teachers are trying to go beyond just providing more information or facts to their students. They're a sign teachers are interested in changing the way their students process all the information and facts entering their brains. A parable is a means to retool one's frame of mind, telling the recipient, "You can't get to where I am from where you are. Unless you drastically change the way you look at reality, you'll never understand what I'm saying."

A parable traps the listener to sign off on something he or she normally would never accept. When, for instance, Jesus is criticized in Mark 4 for wasting his time preaching to the crowds, he quickly comes up with a parable about a farmer sowing seed. If he stopped sowing just because the process wasted most of the seed, we'd have no bread. It all depends on how you look at it.

Today's Lucan parable of the prodigal father accomplishes something similar. Triggered by those in the evangelist's community who can always be counted on to come up with logical reasons for putting limits on their forgiveness of others, the gospel Jesus reframes the issue into a death and life situation. "Your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found." Looking at the younger son's behavior from that perspective, what father - and what Christian - wouldn't throw legalities to the wind? We're dealing with a whole new ball game.

One of the problems we face today is that once Jesus' parables were lifted from their original contexts and "allegorized," they lost a lot of their kick. Rarely do they demand a 180-degree turnabout in the way we think. Yet, as Paul mentions in our II Corinthians pericope, Christians always presume they must develop a new frame of mind. Why? Because the person we imitate is himself or herself a "new creation." The risen Jesus is unlike anyone we've encountered. If we approach that unique person with the same mentality we approach everyone else, we'll never develop into other Christs; never scratch the surface of the "righteousness of God."

Just as things changed when the Israelites celebrated their first Passover in the Promised Land, so if we really want to appreciate the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, we must change our value system. That transformation is what the Galilean carpenter insists upon when he commands his followers, "Repent!"

It's sadly clear that we've resisted this change through the centuries. Instead of developing the mindset of the risen Jesus, we've successfully squeezed his teachings into our mindset, lopping off an ear there, a leg here, until it fits. How can we possibly carry on his "ministry of reconciliation" unless we first accept the uniqueness of that ministry?

As important as today's gospel pericope is in our imitation of Jesus, do you realize that, before the 1970 lectionary reforms, this passage was never proclaimed during a Sunday liturgy? Unless we heard it during a religion class (as I did) or in a retreat conference, we could have gone a lifetime not knowing it exists. And though I did know about it, for some reason I don't remember anything ever being said about the prodigal father's key older son - the person whose mindset triggered the parable's creation.

Even today the vast majority of Scripture is never found in a liturgical setting.

Don't you wonder what else is "out there"?

APRIL 7TH, 2019: FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Isaiah 43:16-21 Philippians 3:8-14 John 8:1-11

Though scholars are convinced today's gospel passage originally wasn't included in our Christian Scriptures – that's why modern translations often relegate it to the footnotes – it still contains a key tenet of our faith: we should forgive others because we've first been forgiven. Perhaps it's one of those stories that Fiddler on the Roof's Tevye includes in his statement, "If it isn't in the Good Book, it should be there." Compared to our first two readings, it doesn't need much explanation.

On the other hand, both our Deutero-Isaiah pericope and Paul's Philippians verses open the door to reflecting on things we often overlook.

I encountered a woman once who assured me she'd been saved; even provided me the exact date on which the event happened. Though I envied her certainty, I don't know Deutero-Isaiah and Paul would agree with her extreme confidence. Both regard God's working in their lives as an ongoing process. As long as we breathe, it's never over.

This is especially clear in Deutero-Isaiah. Though they rarely show up in translations, he constantly employs participles in order to show God's ongoing work in our lives. For instance, the first verse of today's passage literally reads, "Opening a path in the mighty waters . . . leading out chariots and horsemen." What Yahweh once did, Yahweh continues to do. The exiled Israelites to whom he prophesied, presumed Yahweh's glory days were far behind him/her. One of the prophet's objectives is to demonstrate those special days are still happening, even during his audience's lifetime.

That insight leads to one of Scripture's most powerful verses. "Remember not," Yahweh insists, "the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; see, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" True prophets can't depict Yahweh by pinning a still photograph to the wall. If your Yahweh's not moving and constantly doing new things, it's not Yahweh. You've been given the wrong bill of sales.

Yet Paul of Tarsus is not only convinced that Yahweh moves, he assures us that those who follow the risen Christ also move. His discipleship forces him to go from one stage of life to another, all the time becoming more one with the person he imitates, until he eventually attains the new life Jesus has attained.

In one of the most beautiful passages in Scripture, the Apostle admits to something that the already saved woman I encountered never seems to have experienced. "It is not that I have already taken hold of it or have already attained perfect maturity, but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it, since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ Jesus."

For other Christs, there's always another door to open, one more road to travel, a new person to encounter. My Grandpa Karban once shared a bit of his years of experience with me. "Roger," he warned, "the day you have nothing to do is the day you die." The older I get, the more I appreciate his advice, though through the years I've discovered it's hard not to die before I die.

Perhaps that's why it's important to understand what Paul means by having been "possessed" by Christ. Of course he wants to possess his resurrection, but he realizes that before he can pull that off, he must first share in "his sufferings by being conformed to his death." If Christ possesses him, it's only because Christ has taught him to die. That's why the two passion narratives which will be proclaimed next week on Passion Sunday and Good Friday are so important. If we don't know how he dies, we won't know how we're to die. We might end up saved, but never "possessed."

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