

APRIL 17, 2011: PASSION SUNDAY

Isaiah 52:4-7 Philippians 2:6-11 Matthew 26:14-27:66

Because we usually have ideal expectations for important people in our lives, I always cautioned my high school marriage course students to be extremely honest about the personality traits of anyone they planned to marry. I took for granted they'd already created a picture of an ideal spouse, complete with a list of characteristics he or she should possess. Problems would arise when they discovered someone who might possess six out of ten of those ideal traits, and they presumed the other four were also there, just below the surface. What happens when they eventually find out those other four never existed?

Some who initially followed Jesus made the same mistake. Looking forward to a Messiah entering their lives, they found some of the biblical and popular traits of this longed for person in the carpenter from Capernaum. He certainly was charismatic, a leader who emphatically reminded his fellow Jews of the things Yahweh expected of them. So they presumed a passion to drive the Roman army of occupation out of Palestine was also part of his psychological makeup. He just hadn't made his political move yet.

Boston College Scripture scholar PHEME PERKINS makes an interesting observation in a recent issue of the Bible Today: "The difference between what outsiders say about Jesus and what Christians believe dominates (Matthew's) passion narrative. Until they meet the risen Lord in Galilee, Jesus' disciples are trapped in the middle between their loyalty to Jesus and the popular hope for a powerful messiah king." That means some might even have overlooked his riding a donkey into Jerusalem on this day instead of sitting astride a military leader's mount - a horse. It'll take some time, but he'll eventually live up to their expectations.

Judas was probably the most realistic of Jesus' disciples. Earlier than others, he reasoned Jesus wasn't the person he expected him to be. So he tried at least to make a few bucks off their misdirected relationship.

Even Peter, boasting at the Last Supper, "If I should have to die with you, I will not deny you!" eventually discovers Jesus isn't someone who'll go down - with Peter at his side - physically fighting their enemies. When he claims, "I do not know the man!" he's telling the truth. He obviously believed Jesus was someone he wasn't.

No doubt Jesus' closest friends would have been quite happy had he responded to the "Come down from that cross!" taunts by actually doing so. They could understand a triumphant Messiah; but not one who dies.

According to the evangelist, the only followers who hung with him to the end were ". . . many women . . . looking on at a distance who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him."

These women seem to be heeding the rest of the advice I offered my marriage course students: Don't dump someone just because he or she doesn't have all ten of your ideal characteristics. In many cases, the qualities they do have might be better for you and your relationship than some of your magic ten.

Those disciples who, like the women, eventually stayed around for that well-known Galilee mountain top encounter, only did so because they began to appreciate that the redemptive suffering Deutero-Isaiah speaks about in our first reading would benefit them infinitely more than kicking Romans out of Jerusalem.

Even more significantly, as Paul reminds his community in Philippi (in a verse unbelievably omitted from today's liturgical reading), "Have among ourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus." Not only are we to admire Jesus' generous emptying of himself, but because we're other Christs we're expected to possess that same generous, but originally unexpected personality trait.

We don't have to live up to other people's expectations as long as we, like Jesus, give them something better than they could possibly have expected.

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APRIL 24, 2011: EASTER SUNDAY

Acts 10:34a, 37-43 I Corinthians 5:6b-8 John 20:1-9

On this day of all days, it's important we understand the difference between resurrection and resuscitation. In the Christian Scriptures, Jesus of Nazareth is the only person who rises from the dead. Lazarus, the widow Nain's son, Jairus' daughter, and Dorcas are resuscitated. Though I have no doubt these four had been declared clinically dead, when Jesus (or Peter) brings them back to life, they continue to be the same persons they'd been before they died; they possess the same DNA, look the same, have the same likes and dislikes. When Jesus, for instance, tells Mr. and Mrs. Jairus to give their daughter something to eat, if the girl had a liking for ham and mushroom pizzas before she died, her mother would have quickly popped a ham and mushroom pizza in the microwave. The undisputed proof these four were resuscitated and not raised is that each of them eventually died again.

On the other hand, when someone rises (or is raised) from the dead, he or she becomes what Paul refers to as a "new creation." He demonstrates this in Galatians 3. At three o'clock on Good Friday afternoon Paul presumes a free, Jewish man died on Jerusalem's Golgotha hill. But the person who came from the tomb on Easter Sunday morning was just as much enslaved as free, as much a Gentile as a Jew, and as much a woman as a man. Resurrection brings a complete transformation. And, unlike the resuscitated, the raised never die again.

The new creation aspect of resurrection is one of the reasons our sacred authors are "guilty" of so much disparity and so many contradictions when they write about the risen Jesus. He/she defies being squeezed into recognizable categories. We're dealing with someone who goes far beyond our ordinary human experiences.

Yet, Luke, Paul and John - the authors of today's three readings - take for granted that anyone reading their works has already come into contact with the risen Jesus in his or her life.

Luke says that expressly when he talks about those who proclaim the faith to others. "This man God raised on the third day and granted that he be visible not to all the people, but to us, the witnesses chosen by God in advance, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead."

As we know from chapter 11 of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, the "eating and drinking" Luke mentions in our Acts pericope probably refers to the Eucharist. It's in that action that the risen Jesus becomes most present. But even here in chapter 5 the Apostle demands we create an entirely new way of looking at reality. Except for Jesus' mini-parable about the woman burying a small amount of yeast in her bread dough, our biblical authors always equate yeast with bad stuff. Here Paul talks about it being "malice and wickedness." Those who follow the risen Jesus will only experience him or her if they replace their old yeast with "sincerity and truth:" undergo a complete change of their value systems.

Though fundamentalist Christians rarely admit it, John's empty tomb narrative almost completely contradicts his three predecessors' narratives. But John, like Mark, Matthew and Luke, also presumes his readers already believe Jesus has risen. His goal isn't to pass on the facts; he's much more concerned with making certain we know the implications of the event. Among other points, the evangelist here tells us that even though we hear the word of others (Mary of Magdala) on the subject, we still have to go to the tomb ourselves and eventually reach a point where we begin to believe.

Perhaps one of the reasons some of us have yet to encounter the risen Jesus is because we're looking for someone who doesn't exist: a resuscitated Jesus.

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