



God Comes First

Romans 6:1b-11; Psalm 69:7-10, 16-18; Matthew 10:24-39

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I enjoy working in my backyard, mowing the lawn, pulling weeds, trimming bushes, digging and then planting new flower plants or small trees, and generally keeping it nice and neat. One of you called me this week and I missed. When I returned his call, I explained I was out mowing. This, I was told, brought a smile on his face because he imagined me pushing a lawnmower with my clergy collar on. Sorry to say, I don't wear a collar when working outside.

I enjoy working in my backyard, even though I get scratches, the back hurts, and need to pull the occasional thorn out of my flesh. I need to do it. I want to do it. No one else is there to do it for me. I'd rather hire people for things I don't know how to do myself and am ready and willing to pay an honest hourly rate for honest work, a living rate meant for the thriving of the laborer and his or her family, including health care. People can't come and work for free. Slavery was abolished a long time ago. I imagine we all see the ethical implications of the exchange of goods: compensation must be equitable and mutually beneficial.

It's not that different in God's field. There, disciples are confronted with hard, rocky and thorny issues, too. Now we consider it a no brainer that slavery, the possession of human beings of any age, human trafficking, and exploitation is not ethically acceptable. Yet, it took a Civil War for people to settle this, and the Church at the time was standing on both sides of the issue. But how could you blame the Church? Slavery is contemplated in the Bible and the Church felt justified in enslaving people. Many Christians not only lost their enslaved people at the end of the war, they also needed to let go of their literal understanding of the Bible. It wasn't wrong for the Church to be aware of the signs of the times. It was shameful that the Church should trail behind society instead of being a guiding light, a city on a hill.

We can see how some elements of the Bible need to be reinterpreted because they relate to issues proper of certain times, cultures, and societies. Our society has decided, in the case of slavery, that it is not admissible to treat people as chattel and economic possession and has led the way to make the necessary ethical, legal, and educational changes to respect and uphold the equality of all people. The Church, finding herself outpaced, also needed to be guided and, in the process, has gained a new understanding of what it means that we are all children of God.

Years later, the Church found herself struggling with the issue of civil rights. What was the Church to do, side with those who suffered injustice and march in front of the line or require patience and compliance in the assurance that eventually wrongs would be corrected? How hard it is for the Church to put herself in the shoes of those who suffer! And yet, that's where Jesus told us we would find him. He is always ahead of us, preparing the mission field:

“Where I am there you will be also.” (Jn 14:3) And where is Jesus? Where can we find him?

“I was hungry, homeless, in prison, sick, a stranger, ...and you welcomed me!” Today, we could just as well say: “I had no health coverage, I was a refugee, I was LGBTQIA+ and you embraced me, you honored me, you loved me!” (see Mt 25:31-46)

Is it proper and ethical for the Church to get involved, to help out, to advocate? Can the Church avoid her responsibilities? But that’s what we are called to do. That’s part of our baptismal vows.

Speaking up doesn’t create division. The division in society is already a reality. The question is: Who can afford to ignore the abuses? Who is to benefit from the silence?

Speaking up prophetically exposes the injustices for all to see and maybe those who have eyes to see and ears to hear will be able to catch up and be agents of change. Keeping to the status quo and pretending not to see or hear is a privilege only for those who have much to lose. Those who push for change are those at the margins and in need of a better, more dignified and respected existence.

Many Christian denominations today are struggling with women’s ordination, gender issues, racial issues, pluralism, and a changing cultural and spiritual landscape. We witness ongoing conflict in society and in the Church about those issues. Culture is leading the way and years from now we will consider those issues no brainers. Even in these cases, the Church is struggling to keep up. And in the meantime, we experience internal and external conflicts.

Jesus announced the conflict his disciples would encounter. Today’s Scripture selection is a hard one to comment upon. The language deals with violence of all sorts even to the point of experiencing death. To the Roman Church, Paul explains that the reality of embracing the truth of Christ in whom Christians are baptized includes dying in him. In Paul’s imagery, the Christian life requires our old self to be crucified, as if baptism aims the sword at oneself. In truth, once we are immersed in the waters of Baptism, our old self, our ego centered referential point, our personal opinions and desires, drown and a new, other-centered, Christo-centered person is borne. Once baptized, we are grafted into the Body of Christ, into one another, for we are the Body whose head is Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23). If we are members of one another, entrusted with Jesus’ compassionate ministry of reconciliation, how can our mind set on ourselves? We are outward looking people.

To his disciples, Jesus warns that violence and divisions are to be expected. He breaks the news that he has brought a sword and not peace. Therefore, it’s best to stick with our all-powerful Creator, source and sustainer of life. Where is the “Good News” in all this?

Surely, Jesus’ choice of words is quite intimidating. They come across as a threat. He doesn’t sound like the Jesus we know, the Jesus who at the moment of his own arrest told to Peter, "All who take the sword will perish by the sword." (Matthew 26:52) That Jesus, the compassionate, people-lover Jesus, has never promoted vengeance of any kind (Matthew 5:44-45) and has rather counseled his disciples to lose their life (even for their enemies, see Matthew 5:43-48) if they want to find it. Jesus’ alternative, nonviolent way gives life.

Perhaps, his words are in line with the biblical encouragement to give voice to our human experience of anger and frustration without acting upon it but to entrust it to God who assures, “Vengeance is mine.” (Deuteronomy 32:35; Psalm 68:22-24; 137; Romans 12:19) The hope that God will protect the righteous and smite the wicked, if we would admit it, remains strong among many who think of ourselves as Christian today. In its extreme, it's the way of thinking that defends prejudices, war and capital punishment, insisting that it is godly to punish evildoers.

In many instances, such thinking is tragically understandable. It's hard to imagine not wanting cruel bullies to suffer for crushing others. Undeserved tragedy and persistent persecution nearly always motivate vengeance.

It takes much restraint produced by a living faith in God who hears the cry of the poor and the afflicted and is always ready to care. There is no need for retaliation. In God's good time (as we live on Earth or beyond) and when appropriate, God will intervene and right the wrongs and hurts. We trust, so we leave it up to God.

God is beyond us, always exceeding our easy grasp. Recognizing God's awesome transcendence brings a reevaluation of other values. Trusting this God, who knows the hairs of our head, we find the courage to overcome fear. We live in faithful relationship to the hair-counting God as we joyfully "acknowledge" the one who acknowledges us. And as we do so, reveling in the intimacy of God's loving regard for us, other relationships, even familial ones, take on a different cast:

God comes first.

Today's gospel reads as a sort of commencement address as the followers of Jesus "graduate" from being students/disciples and now become apostles (those who are sent on a mission.) It's about being prepared for the hard things that may and will happen along the way. We may trust two divine promises: first, God is always with you through the good times and the hard times, through the joy and the tears; second, you are enough: God cares for you deeply. In encountering the world, each of us needs to be reminded that God is with us and that in our dedication and association with God we find enough inner resources to face the world.

This passage from Matthew's second discourse suggests that the community of the evangelist was facing quite a few challenges: internal struggles to achieve leadership prominence, external persecution and expulsion from community life, and alienation from nonbelieving family members. Jesus, depicted as an eschatological judge, spoke sternly: some people will suffer hell, families will be split apart, and everyone must carry a cross. Of course, the mention of hatred is disturbing.

Interspersed in the grim scenario are words of comfort.

God's care for sparrows calls us to trust in God, since Matthew states here (and in chapter 7) that humans have more value than birds. Sparrows were among the cheapest birds sold in the markets of Matthew's time. If God does indeed care for the sparrow, would God not care for us?

Christianity is not about fuzzy warm feelings. Love requires sacrifice. Love requires justice and is not content with the status quo. Matthew's words about a reversal of slave and master may sound benign to Americans who believe in equality, but such words must have sounded bizarre (like losing one's life to live) to citizens of a slave culture. Matthew is saying that cultural patterns may be totally inappropriate for those who follow Christ. What in our culture have we given for granted and yet the words of Jesus challenge and reverse?

In the early days of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a unique video went viral. A Ukrainian woman confronted some Russian soldiers, called them invaders and fascists (among other things), and became famous for giving one of them sunflower seeds. She said he should keep the seeds in his pocket so that they would grow once he was buried under Ukrainian soil.

No one can blame the woman. She protested creatively and non-violently the abuse and violence of one nation over another. She was letting the soldier know that his and his leaders' actions will produce much destruction and the death of many.

Commitment to kingdom justice will bring conflict. May we rest assured of the Spirit's presence and God's whispering of the right words at the right time. Amen.