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'God-wrestling'

Roger Karban | Sep. 23, 2012 Spiritual Reflections

Though today?s Gospel passage presents us with Mark?s second step in dying with Jesus, we must start with today?s Wisdom reading to appreciate the point the evangelist is trying to make: ?The wicked say, ?Let us beset the just ones, because they are obnoxious to us; setting themselves against our doings ...? ?

Who are these ?just ones??

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Wisdom 2:12, 20

James 3:16-4:3

Mark 9:30-37

The biblical definition of a ?just? person concentrates on one?s relationships with others, both human and divine. If the sacred authors call a person just, they?re saying he or she relates in the way God relates to us? Relationship is the name of the biblical game.

That?s why biblical prophets constantly struggle against fertility cults -- religious actions meant to control the gods to whom they?re directed. I often refer to these practices as ?kryptonite theology.? Superman normally is more powerful than any human being, yet one little piece of kryptonite renders him helpless.

Fertility cults offered people a way to control the gods. If they performed a religious action in a certain way, did it a specified number of times, or said special words, the gods were forced to give them what they wanted.

True Israelites, on the other hand, were committed to relating with, not controlling Yahweh. As depicted in the story in Genesis, Chapter 32 of Jacob?s encounter with God, Israelites traced the origin of their name as having something to do with ?God-wrestling.? Instead of pulling out the kryptonite, real Jews were willing to go best out of three falls with Yahweh.

By implication, Israelites were also committed to relate with, not control others, to engage in the wrestling that is an integral part of all relationships.

That?s where today?s Gospel comes in. Though we again hear Mark?s prediction/misunderstanding/clarification pattern, this time the misunderstanding happens offstage. Jesus asks his disciples, ?What were you arguing about on the way?? The Twelve say nothing because ?they had been discussing among themselves ... who was the greatest.? No attitude could be more devastating to Jesus? attempt to teach that they must die with him.

According to scholars, Jesus? decision to create the Twelve sprang from his passion for inclusivity; these 12 men were an outward sign that the reform he preached was being offered equally to all Jews, no matter to which of the 12 tribes they belonged.

He now hears his commitment to equality threatened. It?s evident from their discussion that some of his disciples believe that whoever is the greatest controls the next greatest, and the next greatest controls the next in line ... all the way down to someone controlling the most insignificant person in the community.

As part of his clarification, Jesus takes one of the community?s most insignificant members -- a child -- and ?placed it in their midst, and putting his arms around it, said to them, ?Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me.? ?

This is more than just an argument against church cry rooms. The earliest Christians quickly discovered when they related to the most powerless in the community, they not only were dying with Jesus, they were actually relating to Jesus. They were sharing his commitment to building relationships with everyone, especially with those on the fringes of society. (Today?s Jesus would probably put someone with Alzheimer?s in our midst and say the same thing.)

James shares a terrific insight. We don?t get what we want because ?we ask wrongly, to spend it on [our] passions.? Our prayers aren?t answered, not because we?re employing an invalid kryptonite formula, but because we?re asking for the wrong things. Why would God answer a prayer that goes against God?s plan for the world?

Our early church led the way through these uncharted relationship waters. Its first councils, for instance, regularly ?anathematized? bishops who changed dioceses. They reasoned any leader would have problems building relations with one community if a future ?trophy? community was always a possibility.

Jesus expects us to be just, even if we live in an unjust world.

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