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Seeing others first

Roger Karban Illustration by Mark Bartholomew | Mar. 23, 2013 Spiritual Reflections

Each Gospel?s passion narrative is unique.

Though they might sound the same to the untrained ear, each was created to convey the evangelist?s particular theology, sprung from years of reflecting on the implications of Jesus? death and resurrection.

But before we explore Luke?s narrative, it?s important to note something the four evangelists have in common: There?s almost no mention of Jesus? physical suffering. Though we?ve traditionally been encouraged in the stations of the cross and in private devotions to concentrate on the painful bodily aspects of his passion and death, our sacred authors present us with a different picture. Each, for instance, describes Jesus? actual crucifixion using the fewest words possible, simply stating, ?They crucified him.?

The evangelists certainly zero in on Jesus? suffering, but for them his pain is much more psychological than physical. Their purpose in writing these narratives is not to lead their readers to proclaim, ?Thank you, Jesus, for dying for me!? They?re much more interested in having them simply say, ?Thank you, Jesus, for showing me how to die!?

Long before the first Gospel was written, Paul of Tarsus frequently defined a Christian as someone committed to dying and rising with Jesus. The key question for those earliest disciples was, ?How do we pull off that dying? Are we expected to let ourselves be physically scourged, crowned with thorns, have nails driven into our wrists and feet, and then, writhing in pain, die on a cross?? Historically, few Christians would actually imitate Jesus? death by dying that way. But all Christians could imitate his psychological suffering: the pain and death that accompanies the daily giving of oneself for others.

That?s why our evangelists constantly point out the mental stress and pain Jesus endures during his passion and death. His followers constantly misunderstand him, they desert him, one even swears he?s never even met him. Yet Jesus methodically continues giving himself to them, no matter their reaction to that giving. Nothing can stop him from demonstrating his love for others, even if those others reject it.

It?s this type of suffering and death that Paul asks us to focus on in today?s Philippians pericope. At this point

of his letter, the apostle is encouraging his readers to imitate Jesus by giving themselves completely to others. Immediately before our liturgical passage, he tells his readers, ?Have among you the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus? (Philippians 2:5).

With this context in mind, many Pauline scholars believe the apostle is referring to Genesis 1 -- the passage that states all men and women are created in the ?image and likeness of God? -- and is telling his Philippian community not to let their ?God-image? status stand in the way of their service to those around them. Nothing absolves them from imitating Jesus? dying and rising, a dying and rising that took place throughout his life, long before his physical death on Golgotha.

Luke is a master at demonstrating Jesus? concern for others, a concern that comes through even in the midst of his own suffering. It?s one of the main characteristics of his passion narrative. His Jesus is even concerned for those involved in his death.

Only in Luke, for instance, does Jesus replace the high priest servant?s severed ear. Luke alone mentions that Jesus plaintively turned and looked at Peter after his denials, and that he told the weeping women not to worry about him but to be concerned with the suffering they?re going to endure. Two of the most memorable scenes in all four narratives were created by Luke: the good thief and Jesus? prayer as he?s being nailed to the cross, ?Forgive them, Father, they don?t know what they?re doing.? Luke sees no extenuating circumstances, not even one?s impending death, that would absolve a Christian from loving.

Making Jesus? love of others even more significant is the fact that no other evangelist stresses Jesus? innocence more than Luke. During the course of his narrative, he has four different people declare him innocent. Pilate alone says he?s not guilty at least three times.

Yet even against this unjust background, Luke?s Jesus constantly cuts through the nonsense and loves both friends and enemies. This can only happen because he?s emptied himself and looks at the situation he?s in through the eyes of others, noticing their pain, not his.

Especially this week, our three sacred authors are expecting us to go beyond ourselves and listen to others, just as both the historical Jesus did and the risen Jesus does.

[Roger Vermalen Karban is pastor of Our Lady of Good Counsel Parish in Renault, Ill.]

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