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All things new

by Roger Karban

Scripture for Life

I believe each human being has a vision of a new world, a world different from the one in which we're actually living, a world free from the pain and frustrations we're daily forced to endure. Such dreaming seems to be an essential trait of human nature.



The historical Jesus also dreamed of a better world, different from the one in which he lived. His emphasis on the kingdom of God reveals that he wanted and expected his followers to experience a better life here and now, not just in heaven.

Psalm 145

The Revelation of Revelation speaks poetically about the Galilean carpenter's dream. "I, John, saw a new heaven and a new earth. The former heaven and the former earth had passed away. ... [God] will dwell with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, for the old order has passed away."

The sacred author is obviously falling back on Jesus' proclamation, "The kingdom of God is close at

hand! and expressing his belief that God's presence will eventually be real for all God's followers. An essential aspect of creating that new world revolves around the conviction that God is constantly "making all things new."

Though there is some debate about which words in John's Gospel are Jesus' historical words and which were formulated by the Johannine community, everyone agrees the last lines of today's Gospel selection are authentic: "I give you a new commandment," John's Jesus proclaims. "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." They are from the beginning of a farewell discourse, and we presume that a person's last words are regarded as sacred and significant.

For Jesus, love can only mean giving yourself for another. It is a real commitment to be of service to those around us, no matter our emotions.

Productive giving is an art, perfected by constantly reflecting on the changing needs of others and our own ability to respond to those needs. What is good for one might be devastating for another. One size never fits all. That's where today's first reading comes in.

The passage describes Paul and Barnabas' return to Antioch from their first "missionary journey." Though the early Christian authority structure seems to have resided in Jerusalem, the "action" was in Antioch. Even before Barnabas and Saul came on the scene, some in that community had gone against tradition and started baptizing Gentiles without first demanding they become Jews. The two Antiochene apostles continued this practice during their missionary endeavors.

As soon as they arrived, Paul and Barnabas "called the church together and reported what God had done with them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles." The Christian faith was stepping beyond its old structures.

How did these "radicals" know they were doing the right thing? The simple answer: It worked. They discovered these Gentile Christians were just as good at imitating Jesus' death and resurrection as Jewish Christians.

The conservative Jerusalem church would later employ the same criteria when addressing the same problem in Chapter 15. Whatever works must be from God; the Spirit is behind it.

I remember the period during and immediately after Vatican II as a time when all of us were expected to be truthful about church teachings and practices we had once uncritically taken for granted. Were they actually working?

That open window quickly closed. Just page through Robert McClory's book *Turning Point* (Crossroad, 1995) to see what happens when the early church's methodology isn't employed. The question of birth control is still front and center 45 years after Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. The pope ignored the overwhelming opinion of both of his advisory commissions, which represented the responses of thousands of Christian Family Movement members to a survey sent out by commission participants Pat and Patricia Crowley. Traditional teaching on artificial contraception simply didn't work. In most cases it impeded rather than promoted love between married couples.

Teilhard de Chardin once reminded us, "The only thing in this universe which never changes is change." As followers of the risen Jesus, are we constantly training ourselves to be open and observant enough to

know when change is needed to bring about the loving new world for which Jesus died?

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