

Everything is sacred

Roger Karban | Aug. 24, 2013 Spiritual Reflections

Most of us dread hearing the central words of today's Hebrews pericope: "Do not disdain the discipline of the Lord or lose heart when reprov[ed] by him; for whom the Lord loves, he disciplines, he scourges every [child] he acknowledges. ... At times, all discipline seems a cause not for joy but for pain, yet later it brings the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who are trained by it."



For many of us, discipline isn't something to be desired. Not only is it usually a painful experience, it also limits what we are able to do and want to do. It suppresses much of our natural spontaneity. Yet when we look carefully at the kind of discipline mentioned in our Hebrews reading, and referred to in our other two liturgical passages, we surface a unique kind of conditioning: a process that helps us break through the limits that ensnare most people.

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time
Isaiah 66:18-21
Psalm 117
Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13
Luke 13:22-30

Our Hebrews author insists that God's discipline is intended to help us become God's children. It's structured to create in us the same frame of mind that God has, to assist us in looking at God's creation as God looks at it.

Real prophets always take us back to the beginnings of our faith. Third Isaiah does that today. Though he's pleading with the recently released Babylonian captives to return and rebuild Jerusalem, he wants them to come back to the Promised Land with a different frame of mind than their parents and grandparents had when they were forced into exile in 586 B.C.

The prophet takes his people back to a period before there were Jews and gentiles, to a time prior to Abraham and Sarah. One of the spin-offs of the Babylonian Exile was an extended exposure to non-Jews, forcing some of the liberated Israelites to wonder about the place of gentiles in Yahweh's plan of salvation.

This seems to be why Third Isaiah ties non-Jews into a restored Jerusalem. Once the city is rebuilt, he envisions that gentiles will not only make pilgrimages to Yahweh's house, but God will take "some of these [to be] priests and Levites." A huge game changer. We Catholics exclude only 50 percent of the human race from priesthood; Jews, at the time of Third Isaiah, excluded 99.99 percent. Those rooted in God's discipline eventually are conditioned to regard all people as God's people.

Luke's prophetic Jesus delivers a parallel message in today's Gospel. Continuing along his road to Jerusalem, he's confronted with an age-old question: "Lord, will only a few people be saved?" In other words, is salvation limited to just one group or to a special few within that group?

Jesus doesn't give a yes/no answer. Instead, he warns his followers to do what's necessary to achieve their own salvation. "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I tell you will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough."

Ironically, Jesus' narrow gate demands a wide frame of mind. "There will be wailing and grinding of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God and you yourselves cast out. And people will come from the east and the west ... For behold, some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last."

Followers of a biblical God are constantly expected to overcome the narrow-mindedness that distinguishes many "religious" folk.

Like all Catholic children, I had to learn to relate to the world around me, a world that changed from day to day. Yet, in the middle of all those changes, I could always fall back on one unchangeable reality: my church. I was often assured that I could be certain my church was the true church because it never changed. In the late 1940s and early 1950s I was being taught the same things our church had always taught. Since it was God's will that God's true religion never change, then my church must be the one and only true church.

Though it provided great security for its proponents, this narrow-minded, non-change reasoning isn't biblical. Our sacred authors constantly led their communities into areas few had entered before. That process didn't cease with the writing of Scripture.

Shortly before his death, Karl Rahner reflected on Christianity's four basic changes. The first three had taken place in the church's initial 150 years; the fourth was the Second Vatican Council's presupposition that there's no longer a "sacred language" or a "sacred culture." Swahili is just as sacred as Latin; Chinese culture as sacred as European. I certainly didn't learn that in my catechism classes.

Perhaps we need a little more biblical discipline before the council's insight actually becomes part of our daily church practice.

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