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Unlike catechisms, scripture frequently offers us a choice. The same theology doesn't run from the first chapter of Genesis to the last chapter of Revelation. There are as many unique ways of looking at God in scripture as there are biblical authors. Those who originally collected our sacred writings and put them in the form we have today obviously assumed we'd understand this range of approaches.

It was no accident, for instance, that editors put two different creation myths back to back in the first two chapters of Genesis. Being Semitic, not Greek, thinkers, it was never a matter of either/or, but always both/and. That's why they offered us two different theological ways of looking at the same creation event. They believed that no one myth could completely convey all the possible theological options. The best biblical theologians were those who came up with the most options.

ECCLESIASTES 1:2; 2:21-23

That's also why today's first reading starts with those famous words, "Vanity of vanities, says Qoheleth, vanity of vanities! All things are vanity!" The Book of Ecclesiastes presents us with one part of scripture's "wisdom debate." On one hand we have writings like Proverbs and Wisdom that constantly encourage their readers to appreciate the logical patterns that surface when one follows Yahweh's

commands. Those, for instance, who follow God's rules and regulations can expect to be rewarded generously by God in this life. But, on the other hand, we have writings like Job and Ecclesiastes that ask, "Oh yeah?" As Addison Wright put it in his classic New Jerome Biblical Commentary article on Ecclesiastes, "Qoheleth's quarrel is with any theology that ignores experience and thereby tends to become unreal. Thus he attacks the simplistic statements of the traditional theology of retribution."

Though Qoheleth doesn't encourage anyone to disobey Yahweh's commands, he still points out that many situations require a roll of the dice. "Here is one who has labored with wisdom and knowledge and skill," he points out, "and yet to another who has not labored over it, he must leave his property."

LUKE 12:13-21

At first glance, in today's Gospel pericope, Jesus might seem to agree with Qoheleth. In this itinerant preacher's story, the about-to-die rich man plans "to tear down my barns and build larger ones. ...Rest, eat, drink, be merry!" God has other plans: "You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?" Yet when we look at everything Jesus says about acquiring wealth, we realize he goes far beyond scripture's wisdom debate. That's clear from the event that triggered his parable about the rich man's death.

"Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, 'Teacher, tell my brother to share the inheritance with me.' " Jesus not only refuses to get involved in family disputes, he gives a simple rule for avoiding such encounters. "Take care to guard against all greed, for though one may be rich, one's life does not consist of possessions."

Once again, we have a Gospel passage in which Jesus demonstrates his concern that we live the most fulfilled life we can right here and now. In this situation, his teaching on wealth has nothing to do with our getting into heaven or being sent to hell. This Galilean carpenter is completely down to earth. He want us to relate correctly not only to the earth we inhabit, but to the situations and people that earth offers us. A large part of those relationships concern wealth: the material things we acquire while we're on this earth.

As we've seen, many authors of the Hebrew scriptures regarded wealth as the outward sign we're doing what Yahweh wants us to do. On the other hand, writers like Qoheleth believe wealth is just a matter of how the ball bounces. It has little to do with how one relates to God. Might as well acquire as much as you can and use it

for your pleasure right here and now because you certainly can't take it with you.

Jesus goes beyond both these theologies. In his opinion, anyone who focuses just on acquiring wealth during his or her lifetime is focused on something that is going to bring neither happiness nor fulfillment in that lifetime. As is clear from all four Gospel theologies, both the historical and risen Jesus of Nazareth is convinced the only way to achieve such happiness and fulfillment is to train oneself to concentrate on those they encounter in their daily lives, always trying to care for the needs of people which surface in those encounters.

Such a caring frame of mind normally isn't the first thing that pops up in our human nature. We're normally worried about what we can gain from such relationships, not what we can give. We might believe Jesus' teachings are from God, learn everything we can about them, pass an exam on the subject, but how can we actually acquire a frame of mind that regards wealth as he does? We can stand back and applaud him every day of our lives, but if we're not actually living the life he did (and does), we're simply faking our faith. How do we actually pull off this Christianity thing?

First of all, if we're to be a biblically formed people, we have to employ a different methodology than what we might remember from Catholic school or confirmation classes. In school, we were expected to "learn" our faith: to intellectually understand what Jesus of Nazareth taught, especially about the actions that merited heaven and those that condemned us to hell. We were to know how to answer the questions our catechisms posed during our religion classes, and to walk away with a passing grade from those sessions. It seemed to be understood — if not at times expressly mentioned — that those with the best grades were the best Catholics. It certainly wasn't very complicated. Faith revolved around learning the "content" of faith.

Scripture scholars frequently remind us that there's not a lot of content in our earliest Christian writings. Our sacred authors were less concerned with giving us stuff to memorize and more about showing us someone to imitate: Jesus of Nazareth. They do this by showing him from multiple perspectives: telling us about things he said, narrating his parables, showing his miracles, demonstrating how he argues with his enemies. They're constantly trying to convey his frame of mind, which they expected their readers either to already have or be actively working to attain.

I'm always disturbed by those passages in Paul's letters in which he actually has the nerve to tell his readers, "Imitate me." (Cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:6, Philippians 3:17, 1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1.) Thankfully I've never had the guts to tell my students or parishioners to do that. As a teacher and pastor, I'm good at pointing out the ideals we all should be following, but I'm wise enough to admit I'm personally not very good at actually carrying through on those ideals. And often, when I do carry through on some of them, I'm always fearful I'm doing so because that's what's expected of me, not because I'm deeply committed to those ideals. If nobody were looking, I might do the opposite. I certainly don't always "feel" like doing what I actually do. Many times I worry about being a fake.

Yet I remember what many psychologists advise in those situations, especially when it comes to spouses who claim they're waiting and willing to show affection to their partners, but they just don't feel like it. Experts almost always recommend they go through the external actions of showing affection, even without the feelings. Though we might feel we're faking it, the feelings we want to have normally don't surface until after the actions are performed, not before.

The late Fr. Ed Hays, the source of hundreds of parables and reflections in his many books, told a story once I will try to paraphrase because it makes the point perfectly.

It seems there was once a boy born with the ugliest face anyone ever saw or could imagine. People avoided him, and as he grew older he developed a personality to go with his face; surly, sarcastic and mean. He had practically no friends.

One day, a sympathetic soul approached him with an idea. He told the man about a craftsman in the next village who could make masks so lifelike no one could tell.

So the man traveled to the next village, met with the mask maker, and came away with a handsome new face. No one stared at him anymore. People began to treat him civilly. And, best of all, he gradually developed a new, pleasant personality; so pleasant that one day he actually began to date one of the local women.

After a while the young woman asked him why he never talked about marriage. He revealed that he was wearing a mask and warned her that if she ever saw his real face, she would never marry him. But the woman persisted, telling him how much she loved him. So the man removed the mask and said, "Look at who I really am."

To his amazement, the woman didn't turn away in horror. She kept staring at his real face, and then said, "I thought you said you were wearing a mask. Your face doesn't look any different now than it did before you took off whatever was covering it."

He looked in a mirror. Over the years, his face had gradually molded itself into the mask he had been wearing. He had become the person the mask had made him appear to be.

COLOSSIANS 3:1-5, 9-11

Two millennia before Ed Hays began writing his wonderful stories, the Pauline disciple responsible for the letter to the Colossians had a parallel insight: "You have taken off the old self with its practices," he writes, "and have put on the new self, which is being renewed for knowledge, in the image of its creator." I presume not every one of his readers really felt like they were becoming the new person they hoped to be. For most, it probably was similar to trying on a mask. What an ideal community they would have been had there actually been no "Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all and in all." It would have been great if everyone in the Colossian community at least acted as though all these characteristics were present among them. Maybe their actions would actually bring about the reality.

Perhaps this is what the Colossians author was telling his readers: "You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." Was he describing his own experience? It can certainly feel like dying to step into a radical change of lifestyle we want but do not feel confident or comfortable in.

I remember as a child visiting my cousins on their farm. One of the things they encouraged me to do was to swing a bucket of water over my head. Knowing about gravity, I quickly declined. I didn't want to be drenched with the bucket's contents. I was embarrassed when they demonstrated how to do it. As long as they didn't stop swinging the bucket at the top of the arc, the water stayed in the bucket. Though I knew about gravity, I still had a lot to learn about centrifugal force. Just so, there are different forces at work when we imitate Jesus. It is more than just going through the motions. By his grace, we actually become the person we imitate.

When it comes to our faith transformation, we have choices, and not just among various biblical theologies. More personally, we have a choice to imitate Jesus or, as

Ed Hays often reminded us, to just worship him. Worshiping him will probably get us into heaven one day. But imitating him here and now will help us realize the dreams Jesus has for us. Only those who imitate Jesus are actually doing what he wanted his followers to do. Isn't this imitation what we are committing ourselves to do whenever we receive him in the breaking of the bread and by drinking from the eucharistic cup?

The challenge is to carry through on that imitation even when we don't feel like doing it.

When we meet the risen Jesus at the pearly gates, who will we have become when he reaches out and removes our masks?

Planning: 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

By. Lawrence Mick

Today's first reading from Ecclesiastes sounds rather negative — not like very good news — but it points to the road to joy. Qoheleth recognizes that most of what we spend our lives chasing has little ultimate value. It's a message that is echoed in today's Gospel passage: "Thus will it be for all who store up treasure for themselves but are not rich in what matters to God."

Too often such a message is heard as negative, as a condemnation of our desires. A better way to understand such teaching is that it points us to a deeper and richer life, a more lasting joy, and true fulfillment.

The problem is that we so often live on the surface of life. Especially in our consumer-driven culture, we are brainwashed to think that buying and acquiring things will bring us happiness. So we often devote much of our time and energy in pursuit of things that do not last and do not satisfy. What Qoheleth and Jesus both want us to understand is that there is a deeper meaning to life and that our happiness depends on going deeper.

When we go beneath the surface, we often find that things look much different. Note Paul's words to us today: "Put to death, then, the parts of you that are earthly: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and the greed that is idolatry. Stop lying to one another, since you have taken off the old self with its practices and have put on

the new self.” Then he goes on to insist, “Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all and in all.” On the surface, people may look and sound very different, but if we go deeper, we see that all are human, all are loved by God, all are brothers and sisters. And if we go deep enough, we find Christ there, “in all.”

Those charged with preparing and leading worship can also fall into the trap of staying too much on the surface. There is a need to pay attention to the manifold details of the liturgy, but if we spend our time and energy only on getting the rituals right, we may be missing the richness that lies within and under those ritual words and actions. We need to constantly remind ourselves that the liturgy is a means to encounter the living God and make sure that all our activity does not keep us from that encounter. And we need to be constantly seeking ways to help the whole assembly move deeper into the meaning of what we do together at worship.

Prayers: 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Today’s countercultural message about possessions isn’t new, but it has special meaning for us in a society focused on consumerism. How do we tame our own wants and those of our children? How do we reconcile our role in our nation’s economic success, our membership in a capitalist society, and our concerns about financial security with the warnings we hear today? Paul tells us to be ruthlessly honest in discerning whether we have taken off our old selves and put on our new selves in Christ.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you told the crowd to guard against greed: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you showed us the folly of storing up worldly goods: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you taught us that our treasure is not our security: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray for ourselves, for our neighbors, and for the whole world as we struggle with possessions and greed.

Minister For the church that is called to live simply and guard against storing up treasure ... we pray,

- For peace where conflict, violence or war are rooted in the possession of land ... we pray,
- For those who have too much and are reluctant to share what they have with others ... we pray,
- For families torn apart by disagreement about goods or inheritances ... we pray,
- For those struggling to provide legitimate financial security for themselves and their families ... we pray,
- For those who are conflicted about work or careers focused on consumerism or dubious financial dealings ... we pray,
- For those who will never have too much, who barely have enough for survival ... we pray,
- For those among us who are sick or dying; and for those who have died ... *(names)* ... we pray,

Presider God who guides us, you challenge us to question our priorities and values, especially when we are caught up in the mechanics of daily living. You encourage us to keep focused on what it means to live in Christ and not be diverted by the easy distractions of the world around us. Help us to be rich in all that matters to you. We ask this in the name of your beloved Son, Jesus. Amen.

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