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It's easy to forget that the majority of people to whom the biblical prophets proclaimed Yahweh's word never listened to that word, much less carried it out, some even tried to kill God's mouthpieces. This disturbing experience led most prophets to eventually develop a theology revolving around the "remnant." They became convinced only a small group of Israelites would actually change their lives because of the word they proclaimed. Prophets certainly exercised their ministry with low expectations.

This belief is clearly stated in Yahweh's words to Zephaniah: "I will leave as a remnant in your midst a people humble and lowly, who shall take refuge in the name of Yahweh: the remnant of Israel."

Zephaniah prophesied during Israel's 7th century B.C.E. "salad days." Josiah, a rare reforming king, was on the throne, trying to restore the Law of Moses to a position of prominence. Yet according to the late Carroll Stuhlmueller, it appears Zephaniah, along with his contemporary Jeremiah, was convinced true reform comes from below, not from above. People of faith only change their behavior when they personally see a need to change, not when they're ordered to do so. Zephaniah and Jeremiah worked not on the religious surface but in the trenches, where they could find the remnant. They encouraged people to change because of their covenant

relationship with Yahweh and one another, not because of some royal edict. But few Jews were willing to carry their faith to that depth.

Paul of Tarsus also has to deal with a remnant in Corinth; an unexpected remnant. Much to his surprise, the apostle discovers those who eventually chose to relate to the risen Jesus weren't exactly the people he thought would relate when he began his ministry. "Not many of you," he reminds his community, "were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many of noble birth." God turned Paul's expectations upside down. "God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, the weak of the world to shame the strong, the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something, so that no human being might boast before God."

The big question both the prophets and our Christian authors, like Paul, faced is, "Why do some people listen to Yahweh or become other Christs while the majority take a totally different path through life?" It's significant that Matthew's Jesus is convinced it has something to do with weakness – our weakness.

Today's gospel pericope is Matthew's introduction to his well-known Sermon on the Mount: a three chapter collection of some (but not all) of Jesus' moral teachings. The evangelist reminds his community if they've agreed to buy into Jesus of Nazareth's dreams, this is how they'll make those dreams a reality. If, for instance, they want world peace, they'll achieve it only by building loving relationships with their enemies, not by being more powerful or meaner than they are. This unique group experiences a blessing in being poor, mourning and meek. They strive daily to do what God expects: to show mercy, be single minded and bring peace. These special individuals actually rejoice in the persecutions and insults their life-style brings, always looking beyond the present to the future Jesus promised. Such radical beliefs aren't for everyone.

Especially in the synoptic gospels, Jesus says they're just for those willing to "repent:" to change their value systems. Only they will experience God's kingdom: God working effectively in their everyday lives. The Galilean carpenter expects his followers to fly in the face of common wisdom and always put the good of others before their own, to deliberately weaken themselves by constantly giving themselves to others.

Such actions dovetail perfectly with the theology of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. This famous French paleontologist not only believed in evolution, he also believed only those who correctly buy into evolution can actually understand Jesus of Nazareth's message and life.

Evolution for Teilhard revolves around "centro-complexity." He discovered that after the big bang, as the universe aged, creation constantly became more centered and more complicated.

This learned Jesuit was convinced that we're called to build this centro-complexity in our relationships with one another. We're expected, in those relationships, to become more one, yet at the same time more complex. We do this by following Jesus' command of love. Teilhard taught that love is the only force which makes us one while it also makes each of us more unique. Eventually when we achieve complete oneness with one another, we'll also become completely one with God: evolution's last stage, the "omega" point of all creation.

Teilhard was convinced it's the weakest, not the strongest link which evolves. Our sacred authors were likewise convinced only a small remnant will ever be willing to trade their strength for the loving weakness God demands.

Matthew 5:1-12a

Today's Gospel pericope is Matthew's introduction to his Sermon on the Mount: a three chapter collection of some (but not all) of Jesus' moral teachings. The evangelist wants his community to know that if they've agreed to buy into Jesus of Nazareth's dreams, then this is how they'll make those dreams a reality. If, for instance, they want world peace, they'll achieve it only by building loving relationships with their enemies, not by being more powerful than they are.

Matthew is convinced that only a remnant willing to look at people and situations with different eyes than the majority of people look at them will actually carry out Jesus' demands. This unique group experiences a blessing in being poor, in mourning and being meek. They strive daily to do what God expects them to do: to show mercy, be single minded and bring peace. They're always looking beyond the present to the future Jesus promised. Obviously such a radical belief isn't for everyone.

The late biblical archeologist Robert North made an interesting observation many years ago in one of my doctoral classes. “The reason Christianity isn’t working,” the well-known Jesuit said, “is because we’ve got too many Christians! Just look at our Scriptures. It’s clear the Gospel Jesus never intended his followers to be more than a very small group.”

His comment dovetailed with something I once heard Karl Rahner, his fellow Jesuit, say: “When Christians reach more than 20 percent of the population they no longer have any effect in changing the culture around them. At that point people become Christians just because it’s the acceptable thing to do, not because they’re really committed to carrying on the ministry of Jesus. Often they’re an obstacle to real Christians.”

A third Jesuit, the recently deceased Daniel Berrigan, once commented he always took away points from any college student who dared employ the redundant phrase “radical Christian” in a paper or report. “If you’re a Christian,” he insisted, “you’re automatically radical.”

What prompts a particular person to chose a commitment to God, to become part of the remnant? I’m convinced, among other traits, a person’s willingness to evolve and adapt is a key element in those who form the remnant.

It’s clear, especially from the synoptic Gospels, that the historical Jesus’ basic “stump speech” revolved around *metanoia*: the determination to change one’s value system. In Mark 1:15, he begins his public ministry by proclaiming, “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news.”

Scholars tell us that in this context the “kingdom of God” refers to God present and working effectively in our everyday lives. This Galilean carpenter shuttered his Capernaum workshop and began his itinerant preaching ministry based on his insight that what everyone wanted – God in their lives – wasn’t an event to nostalgically reflect back on, or project forward to some ideal day in the distant future. It’s a present reality.

But there’s a kicker: to experience such good news, one has to repent and undergo a *metanoia* – the action of making a 180-degree switch in the way one looks at and judges everyone and everything around them. That value system change is not only behind Matthew’s Beatitudes; it’s the premise for the unique morality we find in Christian Scripture. Only those who can evolve daily and adapt enough to make such

changes will be able to experience God among them.

As noted in Mark 10:17-31 we know from Jesus' answer about "inheriting eternal life" that people can get through the pearly gates by just following the commandments. But to be biblically "saved" – to experience God right here and now – we have to go far beyond those commandments and be willing to give up everything to be part of God's kingdom among us. That's the one thing "lacking" in the man's faith; the thing around which Jesus' earthly ministry revolved, the thing which set the remnant apart from those who were content to just get into heaven.

Why is it essential to surface those remnant individuals who are able and willing to change and evolve? We discover one reason in the 20th century theological work of Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. This famous French paleontologist not only believed in evolution, after years of reflection, he also believed that only those who correctly buy into evolution can actually understand Jesus of Nazareth's message and life.

Evolution for Teilhard revolved around "centro-complexity." He was convinced that after the big bang, as this universe aged, creation constantly became more centered and more complicated. Our human bodies, for instance, are not only more complicated than one cell amoebas, they're also more centered.

According to this learned Jesuit, today we're called to build this centro-complexity in our relationships with one another. We're expected to become more one, yet at the same time more complex. The main way we do this is by committing ourselves to follow Jesus' message of love, to continually give ourselves for and to one another. "Love alone" Teilhard insisted, "is capable of uniting living beings in such a way as to complete and fulfill them, for it alone takes them and joins them by what is deepest in themselves." Love alone makes us one, while it also makes each of us more unique.

Eventually when we achieve complete oneness with one another, we'll also become completely one with God. Teilhard was convinced that such unity is evolution's last step: the "omega" point of all creation.

Obviously we can't expect everyone to revolve their lives around centro-complexity and the constant love of others that brings it into existence. We, like the historical Jesus and the biblical prophets have to work with what we got. Jesus, for instance, was realistic enough to know that only a small group of his fellow Israelites had the courage to join him in the reform of Judaism he was preaching. Yet, along with North

and Rahner, he was convinced that if that small group really dedicated themselves to carrying on his ministry, they could change the world for the better.

It's essential to note that according to Teilhard's theology it's the weakest, not the strongest link which evolves. The latter, because of its strength, finds it difficult to change and adapt; it eventually becomes extinct. Perhaps that's why no dinosaurs are roaming our planet today. On the other hand, cockroaches pop up wherever we go.

There was a time when both existed side by side. Whatever catastrophic event wiped out the dinosaurs simply forced the roaches to evolve. A pest exterminator once told me that when he treats a house for roaches, he has to kill every one of them with the initial treatment. If any survive, their next generation adapts so quickly that most will be able to feed off the poison which killed their parents!

From their own personal experiences of relationships, both Jesus and Teilhard knew nothing weakens us more than our love of others. When we give ourselves on that level all our defenses, all our strengths are wiped out. Yet, it's only in that action that we create centro-complexity, that we take another step toward evolution's omega point.

No wonder only a small remnant of believers was (and is) willing to take that step. Without knowing anything about Teilhard and evolution, Paul of Tarsus noticed 2,000 years ago that "God chose the weak of the world to shame the wise." Most of us look at the education we've acquired or the wisdom we've gained as strengths to be proud of, not realizing, as Paul did, that they could also be obstacles to evolution, closing our minds to notice what the weak notice, stopping us from being open and giving to those around us. With such an approach to life, we could end up being the dinosaurs of our day and age.

Since no one action shows love to everyone all the time, evolving people constantly are open to the needs of the people they love, gearing their actions to those needs in the changing situations they find themselves. What was a sign of love yesterday might not be a sign of love today. Only those alert to such changes can meaningfully love others.

Speaking last summer to his fellow Jesuits in Poland, Pope Francis insisted, "We need to form future priests not to general and abstract ideas, which are clear and distinct, but to the keen discernment of spirits so they can help people in their concrete life

... In life not all is black on white or white on black. No! The shades of grey prevail in life. We must teach them to discern in this grey area."

Such adaptability and openness isn't easy to teach or to learn. But every time we love in ways that achieve centro-complexity, we become part of the remnant which not only followed Jesus of Nazareth, but also appreciates his biblical words and example today. That remnant, experiencing God among them, is slowly but surely helping all of us go forward to Teilhard's omega point.

Planning: 4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

Today's readings don't have many obvious connections to epiphany themes. All three readings and the psalm seem to revolve around the theme of humility. The first reading is clear: "Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth . . . seek justice, seek humility." The psalm response comes from the Gospel: "Blessed are the poor in spirit; the kingdom of heaven is theirs." Paul reminds the Corinthians that most of them do not come from the powerful or upper classes. God chooses the weak and the lowly, a reminder that our belonging to Christ is God's doing rather than our own accomplishment. And, of course, the Beatitudes reinforce that message by holding up those who are poor in spirit, the meek and the powerless for praise.

These are healthy reminders for all of us who hold any kind of leadership positions in the church. Planners may not think of themselves as leaders, but they have the responsibility of leading the parish into better celebrations. We need periodic reminders that we are engaged in work that depends on God's grace. Whatever good we do is not cause for pride or boasting.

A strong echo of the Epiphany feast occurs later this week. Thursday is the Presentation of the Lord. This feast, which once ended the forty days of Christmas, reprises the theme of light that marks the Christmas season. Prayer texts for this feast are found in the Proper of the Saints under February 2. The readings are in the Sunday Lectionary in the section titled Solemnities and Feasts of the Lord and the Saints, which is near the back of the volume, as well as in the weekday Lectionary under February 2.

Consider how best to celebrate this feast in the parish. Would an evening Mass draw more people? If so, it would allow for a more effective contrast between darkness and light for the candle blessing to be at the beginning of Mass. Study the Missal to decide which form of the entrance rite will work for your community. If you can do a candle-lit procession, even a short one, it will be memorable.

Friday is the Memorial of St. Blaise. Throats may be blessed on this day. The *Book of Blessings* (#1622) indicates that the blessing can be given within Mass or during a celebration of the Liturgy of the Word, and may be given by a priest, deacon or layperson. (A layperson does not make the sign of the cross.) Always do the blessing with the proclamation of God's word, however; even the shortest option in the *Book of Blessings* includes a reading. That helps keep the blessing in the realm of prayer rather than magic.

Prayers: 4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

In a culture obsessed with strength and success, today's readings are startling. The qualities and behaviors identified in the Beatitudes look nothing like economic, political or social strength. Instead, they appear to demonstrate weakness. Paul tells us that God chose the foolish, the weak, the lowly and despised to shame the wise and the strong. Those of us who say we follow Jesus have some soul-searching to do. How do the Beatitudes fit with our professional and life-style commitments? How willing are we to engage in the *really* hard practices? And what would it mean if we don't want to?

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you turn our requirements for success upside-down: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you remind us to live humbly and justly: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you challenge us to examine how we live: Lord, have mercy,

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray now for the strength to live in the world as Jesus calls us to live.

Minister For the church: that we may demonstrate to the world what it means to live the Beatitudes ... we pray,

- For the courage to be peacemakers in our homes, our cities, our nation and across the planet ... we pray,

- For the will to mourn with those around us who are overwhelmed with grief and sorrow ... we pray,
- For the courage to insist on justice for the poor, the outcast, the alienated and the persecuted ... we pray,
- For the will to show mercy toward those we deem unworthy and undeserving ... we pray,
- For the wisdom to recognize and honor strength in those who appear weak ... we pray,
- For those who feel insignificant or useless; for the sick and dying among us; and for those who have died ... *names* ... we pray,

Presider God of justice, we, who are bombarded by society's call to be successful, pray that we may be able to live humbly and justly. Give us the courage to closely examine our lives and to respond to the call to live for others instead of ourselves. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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