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An open-door policy

Roger Karban | Jul. 20, 2013 Spiritual Reflections

Our sacred authors fre-quently present their readers with concrete examples of people they can imitate. They presume certain men and women through the centuries have embodied specific characteristics that set them apart as God?s followers, traits we?re expected to make our own.

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Genesis 18:1-10a

Psalm 15

Colossians 1:24-28

Luke 10:38-42

Both this week and next, our Gen-esis author will present some of those characteristics as exemplified by the Bible?s two original followers of Yahweh: Abraham and Sarah.

Today the trait is hospitality.

Just as we often define the Ameri-can presidency in the way our first president, George Washington, defined it, so ancient (and modern) Israelites often define their relationship with Yahweh and those around them in the way Abraham and Sarah dem-onstrated those relationships.

That?s where today?s first reading kicks in. Our sacred author is con-vinced that one way his or her readers can demonstrate they?re dedicated to carrying out Yahweh?s will is to ex-tend hospitality to strangers.

The three travelers don?t even have time to ask for hospitality. When Abraham ?saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them; and bowing to the ground, he said, ?Sir, if I may ask you this favor, please do not go past your servant. Let some water be brought, that you may bathe your feet, and then rest yourselves under the tree. Now that you have come this close to your servant, let me bring you a little food, that you may refresh yourselves; and afterward you may go on your way.? ?

It?s obvious our sacred author wants to remind the reader to constantly be on the lookout for the needs of others and respond to them even before they ask for help.

Only after the meal do Abraham and Sarah discover the three men are actually Yahweh in human form. (Contrary to some fundamentalist interpreters, the ?three? aren?t an early version of the Trinity. The sacred author simply employed more than one human to convey Yahweh?s superhuman personality.) The Genesis

writer is convinced that our acts of hospitality always lead to a discovery of dimensions of God we hadn?t noticed before.

Because of their generosity, the couple will be recipients of Yahweh?s generosity. Their most fervent wish will be fulfilled. ?I will surely return to you about this time next year,? one of the three visitors promises, ?and Sarah will then have a son.?

The disciple of Paul responsible for Colossians presumes his community will also show hospitality to others. Just as Abraham and Sarah died to their needs to care for the needs of three travelers, so our author believes his mentor Paul died to his Jewish needs and opened himself to the needs of the world?s non-Jews. His generosity eventually led to a whole new variety of Christianity.

Though Paul?s gentile evangelization created huge problems for many early Christians, the Colossians author sees it as part of God?s ?master-plan? for saving the world, ?a mystery hidden from the ages and from generations past. But now it has been manifested to [God?s] holy ones.?

Jesus? initial followers never objected to gentiles first becoming Jews, and then converting to Christianity, but it took a tremendous act of hos-pitality to welcome gentiles into the faith as gentiles. No group could have been more a ?stranger? to those Jewish Christians.

Their hospitality opened a door few of their fellow Jews even knew existed. Like Abraham and Sarah, they discovered new aspects of Yahweh?s personality. Paul and his disciples eventually encountered a God who already had been working through a people who knew nothing of the Torah.

Luke never intended today?s well-known Gospel passage to be a ?contemplative/active? life paradigm: Martha, the prototype for those involved in active social ministry; Mary, the first cloistered, contemplative religious. Following Luke?s consistent approach to women, Mary?s simply a follower of Jesus, doing what all followers are expected to do: first listen-ing to what he says, then carrying it out in her daily life. That?s Luke?s definition of the perfect Christian.

Because of Martha?s hospitality, we discover a unique dimension of experiencing Jesus among us: women as other Christs. If someone, because of cultural expectations and limits, tries to prohibit them from following the call to mirror the risen Jesus, they, like Martha, really don?t appreciate the ?better part? that Jesus offers to all.

Hospitality is an ?iffy? experience. We can usually control what we give, but we can never control what we re-ceive.

If you?ve yet to read Elizabeth Johnson?s book *Quest for the Living God*, at least look at its table of contents before this weekend. This inspired theologian expertly demonstrates what happens when we?re open to the ?strangers? among us. We experience a God many of us have never experienced before.

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