

March 21, 2021: Fifth Sunday of Lent

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by Mary M. McGlone

What makes a person who she or he is? Obviously, there are some genetic and historical givens, but anyone who knows families, knows that even with identical twins, inheritance often influences looks more than personality or character.

It seems that our life is one continual process of becoming our true selves; we are molded by our responses to events over which we have varying degrees of control. Thus, some people who suffer tragedy, chronic disease, injury or disability work with their circumstances, encountering such grace that they would never choose to have avoided their challenge. Others who go through the same thing can get trapped in denial, spend their energy in attempts to overturn the unchangeable, or become bitter and self-absorbed. Whether basically strong and healthy or unusually challenged by compromising conditions, the one personal/physical/spiritual ordeal each of us must confront is death, our final opportunity to choose how to deal with what we cannot control.

Today's selection from the Letter to the Hebrews paints a portrait of Jesus' way of confronting circumstances over which he had no control. Because he offers the model for how to be and become truly human, we will gain from paying close attention to what this letter tells us.

Lest we form an image of Jesus as the ever-in-charge, impassible Son of God who never felt pain or stubbed a toe, the author of Hebrews writes that "he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears." Jesus had to face realities that apparently frightened him, events that he would have avoided if possible, and over which he had no control. How did he face them? He did not hesitate to pray like the psalmists and prophets, letting God know the precise nature and intensity of his complaints.

Hebrews' author makes the mysterious statement: "He was heard because of his reverence." Shouting at God is probably not the first image that comes to mind when we think of reverence, not to mention that it is hardly a holy-card depiction of Jesus. But this reading, following Mark's narrative about Jesus' death (Mark 15:34-37), describes Jesus as shouting at God. The author of Hebrews describes "loud cries and tears" as expressions of reverence! What on earth is this telling us?

Hebrews goes on to say, "Son though he was, he learned obedience through suffering." The most basic definitions of suffering indicate that it is something to that must be endured. Suffering implies a lack of control. Additionally, although it is far from obvious in English, the word obedience comes from words meaning to listen. Hebrews is painting a description of intense verbal disputes between Jesus and God. Obedience in the image of Christ begins to appear far more passionate than passive.

This leads into today's Gospel. It's easy to picture Jesus like a serene philosopher as he teaches his disciples about being the grain of wheat and losing his life. We might come closer to reality if we imagined him teaching his friends with the same passion he expressed with his loud cries and tears to God. He knew that things were spiraling out of control. As he faced what was coming, he was searching the depths of his being, the roots of his faith, and every memory he had of feeling God's presence. He was embarking on the extreme test of his faith, and his obedience led him to approach the coming events as happenings through which he would be glorified, the occasion through which he would be and become his truest self: the son who trusted God beyond human reason.

Jesus arrived at this position as a result of a long practice of listening, of loving God, and seeking to do God's will. This was the culmination of a life of passionate engagement with the One he dared to call Father. Jesus' approach to his death/glorification became his final expression of choosing obedience, of allowing God to be the father who would lead him to become more than he could imagine.

This Sunday, the last before Holy Week, Jesus invites us to dare obedience: to imitate his passion for God. Jeremiah speaks of God writing the covenant on our hearts. That happens only to the extent that we allow it. Jesus demonstrates that obedience is an ever-growing choice for listening to God. Jesus shows us that living with his type of passion will not rule out loud cries and tears or emotional disputes with God in the style of the prophets. Obedience in the style of Jesus is not passive submission, it is passionate, loving, active listening that leads us to become more than we would choose or can ever imagine.

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