

Homily – 40th Anniversary

Friday Sept. 21, 2012 – *Feast of St. Matthew the Apostle*

Join me in a time travel back to May, 1972. Here are some events that grabbed headlines.

- George Wallace of Alabama was shot in Laurel, MD during a political rally.
- Michelangelo's "Pieta" was hacked with a sledgehammer by a deranged man.
- Ceylon became the Republic of Sri Lanka.
- President Richard Nixon and Chairman Leonid Brezhnev signed the SALT I Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.
- Watergate Break-in became the downfall of President Nixon.
- And Sally Preisand became the first female U.S. Rabbi. Sadly, the Catholic Church did not learn anything from our ancestors in the faith regarding this development of religious tradition about the ordination of women.
- Two famous people born in May, 1972 were: Dwayne Johnson who would become "The Rock" and Manny Ramirez who would help the Boston Red Sox win a World Series Pennant.
- Two famous people who died that month were: J. Edgar Hoover and Dan Blocker who we knew as "Hoss" on Bonanza.

- Riva Ridge won the Kentucky Derby in 1972.
- NY Rangers won the Stanley Cup
- L.A. Lakers won the NBA Championship
- Oakland A's beat the Cincinnati Reds 4 games to 3 to win the World Series.

- Most popular TV shows in 1972 were: Colombo, My 3 Sons, Bewitched and The Courtship of Eddie's Father.

- "The French Connection" won the Oscar for Best Picture in 1972
- Gene Hackman won for Best Actor as "Popeye Doyle" in "The French Connection"
- Jane Fonda won Best Actress in the movie "Klute"

- In 1972 the price of a car was \$3,879.00, a gallon of milk was \$1.33; a loaf of bread was .28 cents and a gallon of gas was .36 cents.

I'll pause for a moment while we have a collective sigh.

Suffice to say much has changed in forty years in the socio-cultural and political landscape. And *change* is a theme in the scripture lessons for this sacred celebration.

The reading from Ezekiel 34:11-16 comes at the end of a bitter indictment the Hebrew God makes against the wicked shepherds of the Chosen People. So, in very nurturing language Ezekiel proclaims that God will be the shepherd of his people. The reference to the people returning from foreign lands refers to their homecoming to Palestine after their long exile in Egypt and Babylonia. Pasturing them upon the mountains of Israel is God's way of reversing the worship of false gods on the high places of idolatry which the Hebrew kings and shepherds tolerated and encouraged. It was a scandal that was the prelude to the second exile. Through the lips and mouth of Ezekiel, Yahweh is promising to put a stop to it. The change that is coming is that God will shepherd the sheep; seeking out the lost, the strayed, the injured, the sick, all those who were victimized by arrogant kings and false shepherds. God has had enough and the divine intervention is intended not only to change the leadership but to change the style of the shepherd who in turn will change the hearts of the people.

The theme of *change* is more subtle in the second reading from Ephesians 4:1-7. 11-13. St. Paul is no Ezekiel. As an apostle Paul sounds more like a personal coach than a convincing prophet. His tone is pleading, his message is desperate. He wants his small faith community in Ephesus to stop the divisive behavior that is causing them to get in God's way who desires unity and growth in the community. He extols humility, meekness, patience and tolerance with one another as the spiritual fruits of God favoring them. But their arrogance, prejudices, exclusive behaviors, gossiping and slandering impede others from wanting to join their community. When you already have those stresses in the secular world why would you seek them in a spiritual world? Paul shepherds the Ephesians away from those false voices to own again the true voice of the spirit of God's son who is the source of their faith, baptism, and unity. He reminds them that Christ changed their hearts and when they exercise their ministries in his name then not only are they becoming one in faith but they grow up and come to full stature in Christ.

The gospel reading is a short story of a faithful Hebrew collaborating with the occupying forces of Palestine. As a tax collector, Matthew worked for Rome's version of the I.R.S. He was shunned by fellow Jews and labeled a sinner by the religious leadership. This made him the kind of "outsider" that attracted Jesus of Nazareth. He will bring conflict into Matthew's life turning a vocation-story into a controversy-story.

As a tax collector, Levi or Matthew is in a class of moral reprobates or sinners. The Roman taxes were collected by tax experts, who bid for the right to collect them then extorted them to the limit. That made them not only oppressors but traitors to their own people because they collaborated with the foreign imperial power.

The call of Matthew happens in the same manner as the call of the fishermen. There is an invitation to “Follow me” with an immediate response. But, in Levi’s case, he then invites Jesus to a farewell dinner with his friends “tax collectors and sinners.”

The Pharisees are quick to ask why a rabbi would eat with such social outcasts of the community. It elicits a sharp response from Jesus that values human relations above cultic worship; Jesus values the human heart over prescribed laws.

In this passage Matthew is writing something autobiographical; the compassion Jesus had for him as a sinner. Those who do not recognize their illness will not summon a physician since they are beyond healing. No one can approach Jesus or invite him to a dinner party unless he confesses that he is a sinner. Matthew’s heart is so disposed and his repentance is the kind of change of heart Jesus seeks as an evangelist.

Now let me bring the theme of *change* in these three readings into reflection on this anniversary gathering.

I am not at the same place on the spiritual path I was forty years ago. Three graduate degrees and a certificate in spiritual direction, shifting from pastoral ministry to teaching in higher education, traveling the world and preaching retreats, doing spiritual direction with victims of clergy sexual abuse and publishing articles speaking truth to the arrogant power of Catholic bishops about the scandal being of their making and so far no atonement for their behavior, has been the journey that has triggered many changes in my life. I am now at a place where I am comfortable with interior upheavals.

In forty years I have moved from an initial stage of faith that was rooted in the exterior trappings of cultic priesthood, to a searching stage of faith confronting social injustices in power structures, to an owned stage of faith where Jesus and not the church is the center of my life. It took me about twelve years to reverse the shift from faith in an institution to faith in a personal God. Then it took me about two more years to separate the difference between religion and faith; religion being doctrines, codes, rituals, etc. and faith being personal, intimate, relational. Then it took me another year to realize that religion is a means to an end whereas faith is the end. That is implied in the question of Jesus in Luke’s gospel: *when the son of Man comes will he find any faith?*

Today I find myself at a crossroads. It is similar to the crossroad God was at when Ezekiel became the instrument of divine intervention to prophesy a new chapter in the chosen people’s history with the oracle about a radical change of a new shepherd for the chosen people. It is similar to the crossroad Paul was at with the Ephesians. His vision of a radical change of behavior in order to lure people to Jesus with humble and inclusive hearts made a difference. It is similar to the crossroad Matthew was at when a rabbi stepped outside-the-box and invited Levi to follow him and find a more fulfilling life in that relationship rather than in counting and extorting money.

My crossroad places me in conflict with some current teachings of the Catholic Church and how I will resolve it. It doesn't help that I find the climate in our Church today suffocating and the style of leadership polarizing. I am conflicted about the hidden agenda of Rome re-writing the story of Vatican II. They can do that. But, what they can't do is to get me to accept their edited version as my own story of ongoing faith renewal. I am conflicted over the issue of women's ordination and the expectation that I give quiet assent to that. That is an expectation I cannot meet because I place the sacredness of my conscience above the insecurities of our leaders in Rome. Because their stories are not my stories, nor their experiences my experiences, my assent is to the God of Ezekiel, Paul and Matthew who used their voices to express God's dissent over corrupt practices and help set the people's hearts on a new path of conversion of life and ongoing renewal of faith.

For the past eight years I have lived among and ministered with the Benedictine Sisters. In singing the praises of women religious I acknowledge their gifts and charisms for all ministry, including priesthood. After forty years as a priest I am at a place on the spiritual path where I believe ordination should be based on claiming the fullness of one's baptismal gifts and not on the narrow-minded argument about gender.

That argument holds no weight in light of the great women in the Hebrew Scriptures like Miriam, Sarah, Naomi, Ruth, Esther, Judith, Suzanna. These women stood alongside great prophets and leaders to champion the Jewish people's faith walk with their God.

The women in the Christian Scriptures carried the mantle of prophetic leadership in New Testament communities. Mary of Nazareth was the first disciple, Mary of Magdala was the first witness of the Resurrection, the Samaritan woman was the first evangelist, Lydia and Demaris, were supporters of St. Paul's missionary trips. These were bold women who cooperated with God in unfolding the ever-new adventure of humans having an intimate relationship with the divine. I hold women up today with as much esteem as God held up these women for a full and unwavering role in salvation history. They put a human face on the saying of the late Rabbi Abraham Heschel: *"There are no proofs for the existence of God. There are only witnesses."*

So, I will do what I have done best in the quantum faith-leaps I have made in the past twenty years and keep my focus on God who is hidden in every conflict. There is a wisdom saying: *"What you focus on determines what you miss."* As I try to practice that wisdom in resolving my conflicts, I invite Ezekiel, Paul and Matthew to companion with me. What better friends to have along for the journey of discernment than those whom God befriended and used to proclaim that in all our spiritual transitions God will help us know when it is time to have faith in the magic of a new beginning. Amen.