Spirituality
Scripture for Life
Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



A banner of new St. Oscar Romero hangs from the facade of St. Peter's Basilica as Pope Francis celebrates the canonization Mass for seven new saints in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Oct. 14, 2018. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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Who really gets under your skin? Maybe it's the bully — on the playground, at work, on the national or international scene. Maybe a one-upper who thinks s/he's outperformed everyone else. It may be the resident perfectionist who demands such precision that s/he becomes an expert at criticizing while avoiding any possibility of failure. We all have at least a few candidates vying for the title of most "obnoxious to us."

Rather than fixate on them, we might ask, "Why do they succeed so well at provoking us?" Today's Liturgy of the Word summons us to probe our emotions and convictions in order to understand which values really motivate our own behavior and reactions.

"Obnoxious." What a great word! It comes from the Latin "noxa," which means harm or damage. It sounds like noxious fumes — or perhaps something about which we might say, "It stinks!" It's someone that gets to the guts of our emotional reactions. We react to it as if s/he symbolically exudes an unbearable stench or as if s/he posed a real danger to our well-being. St. James suggests that our reactions come from jealousy, selfish ambition or allowing our own will (passions) to be the measure of all things, etc.

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 22, 2024

Wisdom 2:12, 17-20
Psalm 54
James 3:16-4:3
Mark 9:30-37

In our first reading, The Book of Wisdom analyzes why the just inevitably suffer at the hands of the wicked. Underneath the sense that someone is "obnoxious to us," we can recognize self-defense, a symbolic clenching our fists, thumbing our nose or

simply ignoring what feels negative. Whether we think we are right, or arrogantly claim rights that harm others, we don't want to listen to prophets lest we be moved toward change.

Jesus' disciples followed this latter path. They avoided allowing Jesus' words to get inside them. What better way to do it than to start an argument among themselves? When Jesus reminded them that he would suffer like, or worse than, the prophets who went before him, they changed the subject. They let him go ahead of them, trying to avoid following his ideas or sharing his destiny. They walked behind, but did not follow. Perhaps they were motivated by something James did not mention: fear. They thought that if their hero went down, they would surely be mocked — or more likely, share his fate. That went beyond their expectations — and not in a good way.

Jesus' adversaries followed a time-worn script. Because the false teachers purported the conviction that God liked intervening in history at their bidding, they felt free to torment someone who challenged their behavior. Their contention? God would not allow harm to come to a good person. They repeated what the demon said to Jesus in prodding him to leap off the temple so that God would send the angels to rescue him. Like so many of us, only in a more malicious sense, they were putting God to the test, demanding that God follow their rules: "Let us test him. If he is a son of God, God will deliver him."

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Ironically, they were correct. James teaches us that, yes, God delivers the just and the innocent, but not on human terms. This is where the rubber hits the road. God acts in ways that promote the good of all. God's ways are gentle, peaceable and full of mercy. Because of that, the actions of those who accept God's wisdom are genuine and fruitful. God does not dance to a human tune. God's own can say, "The Lord upholds my life," without planning how God should do it. They expect better of God than of themselves.

This reflects a scene from the movie "Romero." When the challenges seem too great for him, St. Oscar Romero falls to his knees and says, "I can't. You must! I'm yours, lead me!"

That's exactly what Jesus did. When it came to facing his mortal enemies, he told his followers to put down the sword; he trusted that God would not let his life be lost in vain. He didn't ask God to send avenging angels. He went to the extreme of crying out, "Why have you forsaken me!" By doing that, he freed God to work as only God can, peaceably drawing greater good out of immense evil.

Today when we confront obnoxious self-aggrandizing, bullying, divisive people, these readings challenge us to the core. When we find ourselves provoked and tending toward retaliation, James calls us to tame ourselves. Jesus calls us to open ourselves, to hear and trust God. In Jesus and some of our saints, we have what seem to be superhuman examples. Rather than fall into vicious cycles of negativity, let us learn from St. Oscar Romero and pray, "I'm yours, lead me." With that prayer, we open the path for God to save our world.

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