

WDJD

Galatians 2:15-21

June 13, 2010

I heard a news story a couple of weeks ago that has haunted me. Perhaps you remember the story, too, a story about Margaret McBride, Sister Margaret McBride, a hospital administrator and a nun, a member of the Sisters of Mercy.

Late last year the hospital in Phoenix where Sister McBride worked as a vice president was treating a woman with pulmonary hypertension, a condition of high blood pressure in the arteries supplying the lungs. The woman was pregnant, but pregnancy worsens the symptoms of the disease, posing a serious and likely fatal threat to both mother and fetus. A hospital ethics panel on which Margaret McBride served authorized termination of the 11-week pregnancy in order to save the life of the mother.

As a result of her participation in that decision, Sister Margaret McBride lost her job and lost her church. She was “reassigned” and excommunicated, no longer welcome in her church, no longer welcome to receive the sacraments, no longer welcome at the Lord’s table.

What do you think about that?

Now, it’s true, she must have expected such an outcome. The rules of the Catholic hospital are clear -- no abortion permitted, under any circumstances. And rules are rules. You break a rule, you have to know there will be consequences.

Rules are rules. But didn’t Jesus find reason to set aside the rules sometimes? Like that rule about doing work, healing people, on the Sabbath?

That is what haunts me. As soon as I heard the story, I asked myself: “What would Jesus do?” We know what the church chose to do, in Jesus’ name, but what would he do?

What do you think? Her act was not an act of rebellion or defiance. It was not careless or thoughtless. It was not meant to challenge the system, to pose a “test case” to try to change the rules. For Margaret McBride and her colleagues this was an agonizing decision, a choice made reluctantly, but made decisively, in order to do good, in order to preserve life.

What would Jesus do? How would Jesus respond?

Now please understand, I am not ragging on the Roman Catholic Church. I'm not trying to highlight the differences between "our" church and "their" church, to put distance between "us" and "them," because there is no "us" and "them." There is only us!

We are the church, together, all of us who take Jesus' name and commit to follow in his way. We struggle together to act faithfully amidst the difficult ethical dilemmas that face us every day. We all need to ask ourselves: "What would Jesus do?" WWJD.

The problem, of course, is that may be subject to interpretation. Some very different people have some very different ideas about what Jesus would do!

Is Jesus the captain of God's army, the defender of truth and righteousness, dividing right from wrong, separating the sheep from the goats?

Or is Jesus the Lord of mercy, the embodiment of God's love, not judging, but saving, not turning any away, but welcoming all?

Perhaps our visions of Jesus merely reflect our own prejudices and predilections. How can we know for sure, then, what Jesus would do? We'll have to ask! We'll have to ask him! And we'll have to work hard to watch and listen for the real Jesus, as he reveals himself to us.

But as I thought about this news story once more in the context of the scripture lesson from Galatians, I began to see things in a different light. As important as it may be to ask: WWJD? "What would Jesus do?" ... I believe it is more important to ask: WDJD? "What did Jesus do?"

What did Jesus do?

This life that I live now, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave his life for me ...

What did Jesus do? He loved me. Say that: "He loved me."

What did Jesus do? He gave his life for me. Say that: "He gave his life for me."

This is the gospel! This is good news: that in the midst of this evil age, in the midst of our struggle to be what we want to be, to be what we are meant to be, to do what we want to do and what God wills for us to do, in the midst of our struggle against the evil inside us and surrounding us, God acts in Jesus Christ to save us.

Jesus sets us free! Jesus sets us free to be, free to do, no longer slaves to the powers of this world, no longer living under the shadow and fear of death.

Paul wrote this letter because he understood this gospel was under siege. People were convincing believers that they must follow certain laws or must be circumcised as Jews, that they must do this or they must do that, in order to be right with God. They were making God's grace and the fruits of Jesus' sacrifice contingent, conditional, leaving it in our own hands to win life or to lose it.

But Paul understands such conditions gut the gospel of its power and render it meaningless. It puts us back to square one, leaving it to us to make things right with God and make things right in the world. It means Jesus lived and died ... for nothing!

The gospel is news, something new, something radically different. It is good news, something that doesn't just promise life, but delivers it!

But if the news is so good, why couldn't they leave it alone? Why don't we leave it alone? Why are we always setting up rules and conditions and limits for what it takes to be welcome in the church, for what it takes to be acceptable to God?

We do it simply because we want to be able to justify ourselves. Grace is too humbling. Grace is too humiliating. Grace leaves me nothing to do, except be loved. And grace asks nothing from me, except everything, everything I am!

Grace is freedom, not a free pass. Grace is not condoning, it is forgiving. Grace is not easy on sin; it takes me to a place where sin has no power. Grace isn't about putting a stamp of approval on me as I am; it is about remaking me through the power and presence of Christ in me. Grace means that Jesus does not merely show us a new way; it means he is the way!

Let's go back to Sister Margaret's story. In the light of what Jesus did, what do you suppose Jesus would do now?

I think he would weep. I think he would weep for her and weep with her, weep with her for the eleven-week old unborn, not yet, life that was required to save the life of this sick and pregnant woman. I think he would weep for the diseases that plague us and rob us of life and force us to choose where there are no good choices, that force us into lives that are truncated and full of pain and regret.

And I think Jesus would say to her: “Margaret, daughter of Eve, frail and beautiful, full of compassion and overcome by grief, bearing the burdens of others’ sins as well as your own, come and eat. Come and eat at my table!”