

A Book of Surprises

Roger Vermalen Karban

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Fr. Karban is pastor of Our Lady of Good Counsel Parish in Renault IL and a priest in the Diocese of Belleville.

After forty years of teaching Scripture, I still wonder why people keep showing up. Not for the credit classes I teach at the local community college, but for the weekly classes I offer at the parish.

I started teaching on the parish level in 1966. It was meant to be a preliminary course to a class on the liturgy that would help explain Vatican II's changes in the Mass. As much as I love the liturgy, I was convinced I had to begin with Scripture, since many of the changes were rooted in biblical theology and practice. After all these years, I'm still wondering when I can start teaching that liturgy course. Once the Bible sessions began, no one wanted to stop. Eventually I had to take a leave to study for a doctorate in Scripture. Though the parishioners and I have frequently talked about why more people don't come, we seldom reflect on why we do. Recently it dawned on me that those who study Scripture are special.

In every Scripture 101 course I teach at the college, I include Dennis McCarthy's definition of scriptural canonicity. "The reason these particular writings made it into the Bible and others didn't is because these books helped the most people over the longest period of time to understand their faith." Contrary to what most people think, the biblical writings were never intended to give someone faith. They were composed to help believers reflect on the faith they already had.

Though I agree with McCarthy's definition, I hadn't really applied it to myself or the students. When I made the connection, I began to understand why the parishioners continue to show up week after week: They profess the same faith as the sacred authors. Listening to the ancient authors narrate their faith story, all of us come to understand that we are not alone.

After I introduce McCarthy's definition to the college students, I give them an assignment. When they go home, they are to look around and make a list of five special things they have saved over the years, and then tell me why. Usually they report back that they hold onto something because it helps them understand themselves: The dried flower pressed between the photo-album pages; the concert ticket used as a bookmark; ... In a similar way, our ancestors saved the sacred writings that helped them understand themselves and their faith.

Obviously, not everyone in the parish attends the classes, so I've had to ask myself what distinguishes those who enjoy exploring the Scriptures and those who can't be bothered? Here are a few thoughts:

More than anything, I've found that people drawn to reflect on Scripture are open to change and growth. They have come to appreciate that faith is a dynamic experience in their lives. These people are not content to memorize answers from the catechism. In passage after passage, page after page of the Scripture, they revel in the spiritual growth of the people whose stories they discover.

Likewise, the experience of God working in the Bible forces them to drop some of their either/or, Western categories of thinking and come to terms with the Semitic thought patterns of the biblical authors. Instead of analyzing, the biblical writers synthesize and tell stories. Instead of giving a definition of God, they related experiences of God. And sometimes these vary and even contradict one another. I recall Avery Dulles much-quoted remark: "Had there been a Holy Office at the writing of the four Gospels, we Catholics would have just one Gospel in our Bibles: Mark. But in our history books we'd have reference to three notorious early Christian heretics named Matthew, Luke, and John."

Furthermore, people of biblical faith aren't surprised to learn that our experiences of God often originate outside religious structures. While Israel received God's prophetic call in the context of temple worship service, Hosea's experience of God was the result of his painful marriage to Gomer. For students of the Bible, God can be found in the still, small voice of the wind as well as in religious rites or ceremonies. They're uncomfortable with anyone who presumes that only certain acts, performed by specially designated individuals, can force God to act only as they wish. They want to discover the implications of relating to a God who is always other. St. Paul calls such individuals true Israelites, people who spend their lives wrestling with God. They cringe when the Scripture is used as a mere proof text to maintain the status quo or to justify practices the biblical authors knew nothing about.

I've found that those who enjoy Scripture study are convinced God's salvation is never restricted or limited. They're not bothered that God works through liars, adulterers, even murderers, or that Jesus had a habit of associating with sinners. They're convinced that God calls everyone, but that no everyone responds.

In my years of parish teaching, I learned that there are a lot of such people out there, and that they are overjoyed when they discover that they are not alone. These classes create a bond and a special sense of commitment. That's why people keep coming back. Their eyes opened, they understand that their faith is the same one our biblical ancestors shared.

One last point. In the past ten years I've been humbled and impressed by the large number of priests who have participated in my classes. In one recent session, six of the thirty participants were priests. There's just one problem. All of them were married and forbidden to minister officially to God's people. Could God be telling us something?