The Power of Liturgy and the Community

Reflections on the work of Celebration

Contributors
Pat Marrin
Gabe Huck
Roger Karban
Biagio Mazza
Julie Lonneman
Melissa Nussbaum
J. Michael McMahon
Denise Simeone
Lawrence E. Mick
Joan DeMerchant

Mary McGlane
Jim Auer
Dick Folger
Eric Fought
Megan Black
Mary Kay Whitacre
Tom Turner

Cover and Art
Julie Lonneman

Graphics
Mark Bartholomew

Sunday Preparation
Resources include
4-page folios for each Sunday: Commentary, Homily, Graphic, Starters
Additional Planning and Prayers included

Resources online
CelebrationPublications.org

Sunday Music
J. Michael McMahon

Daily Bread
Miguel Dulick
Mary Joshi
Jeanne Lischer
Patricia Russell
Paige Byrne Shortal
The paschal mystery is always present and central to our lives. We know that; we have preached and taught that, and hopefully we have lived that. The closing of Celebration after almost 48 years is part of that mystery. We have heard how much of a loss it is to subscribers as well as contributors. We are so grateful to many who have joined us, some of you for decades, as we have provided resources to the church.

In this final issue, we reflect on how the dream/vision of liturgy as expressed at the Second Vatican Council called the church to create communities that gather around the word of God and the bread and wine and embrace the work involved to build the realm of God. The documents that emerged from the council called us to live the mission of God as promised at our baptism. The Holy Spirit was breathing new life into the process of dialogue at the council. Now, as partners with the Spirit, we bring justice, compassion and healing and by doing so renew the face of the Earth.

The Scripture readings are a part of the rhythm of our lives. Many of us breathe them in day in and night out. They form us, and in that molding we see the guiding hand of God the Potter in the fabric of our lives. The Scripture will always guide us. This month is no different. In the readings, we know our course. We have been prepared as the disciples were prepared.

To this month’s scriptural echoes, I offer four images from Mark Bartholomew, an artist who has contributed inspiring and haunting art for more than eight years. Each image is accompanied by a summons reminding us of our shared mission and responsibility.

- Knock, knock, knock. Never cease knocking for an end of hunger, for equality for all, for justice to envelop the earth, for compassion to overwhelm the most hardened hearts. Bargain with God. Haggle even. Pray for what the world needs to be saved from the damage we have wrought, from the ones we have exiled, for the ones we have hurt.

Welcome God and strangers! Find your own way. Be surprised and be faithful. When you find your neighbor, know you have met God.

When you pray, trust like a child trusts daddy or mommy (or grandma).

You are held in the loving arms of God, nursed abundantly at her breasts. You are wrapped in God’s tenderness and love.

Go forth telling stories. Remind each other. Remember.

In gratitude: Over these last few years, Celebration has built on the legacy of long-time editor Pat Marrin, whose extraordinary writing and careful editing is only surpassed by a conversation with him. We have had a team of writers and staff who worked hard to continue this inheritance both in editing and building an electronic presence. In particular, Toby Becker, who has been with Celebration as its designer for 20 over years, Mike Mathews, Clara Dina Hinojosa and Tom Skorupa have been an incredible team to share this privilege and work.

As this community of Celebration members takes leave of one another, we are especially grateful to you, our subscribers and readers, who have been so faithful in sharing your ministry, your preaching and teaching, and your lives with so many people — the church community owes you a tremendous debt. Thank you.
The Mission to Advance Vatican II Renewal

The gift of Celebration

By PAT MARRIN

I was privileged to edit Celebration for 19 of its 48 years, succeeding the indefatigable Bill Freberger, who died at his desk in Maryland in 1997 at age 56.

Freberger built Celebration into the most trusted worship resource in the United States, subscribed to by more than half of its parishes. He marketed Celebration into prominence by gleaning every diocesan paper in the country and sending gift subscriptions to every ordinandi.

He knew talent. In 1979, he brought on board the brilliant Scripture writer Patricia Sánchez, who provided lectionary commentaries for 36 years, underwriting thousands of homilies preached to millions of churchgoers.

I was further privileged to be crash-mentored by Benedictine Godfrey Diekmann (1908-2002), successor to fellow monk Virgil Michel (1890-1930), architect of the pastoral liturgical movement in the U.S. leading up to the Second Vatican Council.

Diekmann, who served as a theological adviser at the council, never ceased marveling at the “miracle” that the first document taken up was the one on liturgy. This infused the rest of the council’s deliberations with an ecclesiology of the body of Christ, replacing the image of the church as a juridical structure espoused by the Council of Trent.

This shift, Diekmann was convinced, changed the emphasis in all of the other documents, projecting a renewed church that animated the “People of God” toward full conscious, active participation by all the baptized in the mystery and mission of their church.

Celebration was committed to enhancing this vision with resources for Sunday liturgy that formed the laity, supported preaching that did justice, and offered ritual prayer that breathed the Spirit of Jesus into everyday life. This approach dovetailed well with the overall goals of the National Catholic Reporter, whose independent news coverage and opinion promoted an informed laity, institutional accountability and social justice.

During much of the nearly five-decade synergy between news and worship coverage, it was not surprising that the internal church intransigence to renewal was played out visibly in resistance to liturgical reforms. The so-called “liturgy wars” over translations, lay participation, women’s equality and ecumenism reflected deeper battles.

In headlines and cover features, the newsweekly and Celebration both spotlighted the truth of the Latin maxim “lex orandi, lex credendi,” that the way the church prays reveals what it believes. Throne-room worship sought to preserve a monarchical church, while inclusive liturgy celebrated Christ-centered community.

To walk down through the archives of Celebration is to hear the voices of a veritable “cloud of witnesses” to the promise of Vatican II — scholars and reformers who devoted their careers to articulating church renewal as the liberation of the Gospel into history and into the world. Even when the message was delayed and muted, these voices sought, in the evocative lines from T.S. Eliot’s 1930 poem “Ash Wednesday,” to “redeem the unread vision in the higher dream.” Along the way, authors of the stature of Jack Egan, Chicago’s “labor priest,” sacramental theologian Benedictine sister Mary Collins, the heroic Jesuit Dean Brackley, and biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann contributed articles. Dominican priest Paul Philibert, Gertrud Mueller Nelson, Fr. Edward Hays, Zeni Fox and others were always open to addressing topical themes. Steady contributors and columnists supported the working church of celebrants, preachers, music directors, parish secretaries and ministers who, week in and week out, were devoted to “getting ready for next Sunday.”

Julie Lomeman’s rich liturgical images gave Celebration its distinctive cover look over the years. (She has offered her reflections on her art in this final issue.) The photographs and poetry of Benedictine Abbot Barnabas Senecal and photography of Amelia Kunhardt graced our back covers, while Mark Bartholomew, who began producing art for our Sunday commentaries while at the local Catholic Worker house, created a startling retelling of the Gospel from the faces he found there.

The church, like publishing itself in our turbulent age of the internet and social media journalism, is moving forward at breakneck speed. The sex abuse crisis, environmental disasters, global economic dislocation, and the rise of political and military conflicts seem likely to overshadow all other agendas.

Pope Francis’ mission to realize the renewal initiated 60 years ago by Pope John XXIII offers a prophetic roadmap to the future for a church that has always measured progress in centuries and generations. Liturgy remains the church’s “lamp unto our feet,” never revealing more than the next steps but always pointing forward in hope.

The paschal mystery, celebrated on every altar in every faith community, is the engine of that history, the death and resurrection of the body of Christ defining our lives as believers. Being faithful to that mystery is our path to the beloved community.

As a chronicler and resource for that journey for 48 years, Celebration fulfilled its mission. Those of us who were privileged to be part of it as contributors and readers are grateful as we now enter its cloud of witnesses.

Pat Marrin was editor of Celebration from 1997 until his retirement in 2016. He also writes and draws the daily Pencil Preaching column now published at NCRonline.org and is the creator of the Francis chronicles for NCR.
Forget Eternity!

By GABE HUCK

In 2002, the year after I was fired by Francis George, then archbishop of Chicago, Pat Marrin, the editor of Celebration Training Publications, invited me to write each month. George had told me in our “you’re fired” chat that it was a new day for the liturgy and that I was not to be part of it. Pat fortunately didn’t share that view.

For 24 of my then 60 years, I had been Director of Liturgy Training Publications, a publishing house within the Chicago church. I remain grateful to Pat! I could keep writing about the reform of liturgy begun at the Second Vatican Council. All the more grateful because, from the 1980s until now, the council’s vision was being lost as a driving power in the church.

I’m afraid that what I have to say in this last short essay is not going to be hopeful or pleasing to you or to me, but I want only that it be true to the struggles that are now upon us. I write this to challenge myself as well as you.

Were we not charged by Vatican II, before many of you were born, to engage in a renewal so urgent and yet so resisted by many? In the U.S. and much of the West, it died in infancy after quarter of a century. But it did begin. What did it mean when the council challenged us to enliven again “that full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations called for by the very nature of the liturgy”? (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy #14, italics added) Even more, what does it mean to do this with our eyes wide-open to a world that God loves?

This has to be said: At best, we keep only a small corner of ourselves for whatever being baptized seems to mean. We white people anyway have very short lists of how to be Catholic. Nowhere on that list, for the vast majority of us — whatever our wealth or lack of it — are the immense but scary challenges of our time. Is it enough to be known as supporters of making abortion criminal? Enough to support, mildly, some doors kept open to immigrants?

But where are we in word and action on making choices in home and industry and government that will keep this planet possible? Where are we in word and action to make reparations to peoples already hurt by our nation’s unceasing wars — from the original peoples of this land to African Americans? And what about reparations to Asian, African and Latin American peoples where we have had our way?

Friends, the list of issues we rarely ever hear in church is long. The challenge to you who preach comes down to this: You must read. For somehow, there are still truth-telling periodicals and books and even newspapers. How many hours a day, a week, do you give to this? Radio and TV and Facebook and such are nowhere near able to be your homework. Challenging books and periodicals are an amazing resource for us.

I suggest that you subscribe to the twice-monthly The New York Review of Books. Here are many discussions in well-written reviews of important books and in articles commenting on current events. You will have to work; it isn’t always easy, but the authors know their field. You will learn in a way that will lead you to important books and overall will help you know the questions to be asked. These essays will sometimes send you to purchase a book, but more often, the review itself will educate. In reading this resource, you will also sense just how fine the English language can be.

The Nation, a weekly news magazine that has been around since 1865(!), brings commentary on the week’s news and longer essays on questions. Excellent and brief. You surely know National Catholic Reporter, Commonweal and America, but do you know Sojourners, a monthly that has a broader role and an ecumenical commitment? If you have time left for radio/TV, you can livestream “Democracy Now!” weekdays from New York City radio station WBAI or a nearby station. Sources like these will give you incentive to engage in homilies that take time to write and practice. Yes, write. Yes, practice.

The white churches, where most of us hang out, are surely called to repent and make reparations — to take responsibility for what sort of world we made for African Americans over centuries and until now. Is it important? Yes, and again this is where we must be reading and discussing. See, for example, Ta-Nehisi Coates’ essay on reparations in We Were Eight Years in Power. And yes, where there is a church taking shape, there will be struggle. It has always been this way.

It’s only proper and just that we U.S. Catholics now make ourselves the disciples of those in much poorer countries who grasp the Gospel and perhaps also the real work that is liturgy. Here, we are to be a bedraggled community humbly standing around our table and around our book Sunday by Sunday, and so little by little we are shaped into a church. Forget eternity! We know nothing of it and should boldly say so if need be. What do we know and cling to is the ritual deeds that we do in assembly — do with book open, with bread and wine blest and shared. Here, we rehearse our baptismal grappling with the horrors and hopes of our world as we banish suicidal greed.

Now, much of the time, the community doesn’t take its liturgy to heart, doesn’t know it is theirs to do or that this has nothing to do with being an audience. This isn’t a performance to be memorized. It is, at its best, I think, rehearsal for life. And it asks everything of us.

Can we, without such a liturgy, have a community active, involved, generous, doing good works and good politics, and deep into the crises of our time? Of course. But why would we want to? I know the answer: Because we’ve never experienced one generating the other. So let us begin.

Gabe Huck can be reached at gabeandtheresa@gmail.com. Gabe and Theresa’s book about seven years in Syria, Never Can I Write of Damascus: When Syria Became Our Home can be ordered at www.justworldbooks.com/ordering.
Called to Become Evangelizers of Others

By ROGER KARBAN

Many of us presume there is a wall between the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures. Our not so recent history reinforces that idea. Before the Lectionary reforms of 1970, we rarely heard a weekend liturgical reading from the Hebrew Scriptures. We priests preached only from the Christian Scriptures. Yet even today, with our first readings frequently coming from the Hebrew Scriptures, we seldom hear homilies based on that collection. Many preachers simply don’t know what to do with these passages.

The late Carroll Stuhlmueller often quipped in effect, “If those books were good enough for Jesus, they are good enough for me. It was the only Bible he had. He certainly didn’t preach the Christian Scriptures.” Though we don’t like to admit it, Jesus of Nazareth based his reform of Judaism solely on the Hebrew Scriptures. His theology and insights came from books we rarely use.

Part of our problem with these writings is that we know little about them. Our ignorance makes it easy to stuff off what we can’t easily employ as proof texts for the coming of Jesus as Messiah or easily utilize to defend some aspect of Catholic doctrine — things, of course, the historical Jesus never did.

When, for instance, we hear Third-Isaiah’s beautiful words about Jerusalem in the first reading on the 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time, we forget that the only Jerusalem the writer of Third-Isaiah and his community actually experienced was in ruins. Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians had wiped it off the face of the Earth some 80 years before. A major part of the prophet’s ministry revolved around his efforts to encourage the chosen people to rebuild the holy city.

In a similar way, much of Jesus’ historical ministry also revolved around what “could be” if only people would make the effort to create such a world. Just as Third-Isaiah encouraged his listeners to move back to Jerusalem from their comfortable, secure exile and rebuild a place most had abandoned, so Jesus encouraged his followers to abandon their comfortable,ATERIAL dreaming and share his dream of building a unique community.

Those who dared make his dream a reality encountered the risen Jesus in their lives and so discovered the perimeters of the faith they experienced beginning to expand. One of those followers, Paul of Tarsus, eventually realized the risen Jesus’ community encompassed all people, not just Jews. Though Paul’s letter to the Galatians shows that this unexpected expansion was a stumbling block to some of the historical Jesus’ disciples, the apostle’s encounter on the road to Damascus with the person he was persecuting convinced him he was correct. “For neither does circumcision mean anything, nor does uncircumcision, but only a new crea-tion.” Everyone on the face of the Earth is now able to be another Christ.

These new creations quickly became evangelizers of others. They instinctively wanted to share the good news that had transformed them. Luke couldn’t help but reflect on the determination now governing their lives. Convinced their names really were “written in heaven,” they no doubt loved to sing Psalm 66. They personally knew about Yahweh’s tremendous deeds.

Yet, most probably, the passages on which the historical Jesus most based his reform are like the one in the Deuteronomy reading proclaimed on the 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time, passages that speak about returning to Yahweh, your God, “with all your heart and all your soul.”

“Return to Yahweh!” is a constant prophetic demand. Like all reformers, Jeremiah insists on such a return day in, day out. It is at the heart of repentance, so essential that when the prophet’s ready to throw in the towel in Chapter 15, Yahweh demands that Jeremiah abandon his prevalent, unworkable theology and in verse 19 calls Jeremiah to return to God. Returning to Yahweh pertains to everyone, even prophets. Perhaps that is one of the reasons the classic Gregory Norbert hymn “Hosea” with its refrain, “Come back to me…” remains a community favorite. At times, we have all wandered far away from the one who gives us life.

In some sense, most authors of the Hebrew Scriptures require that people of faith cut through all their theologies, all their traditions, and all their religious practices and just go one-on-one with the God present in their lives. As both the author of Deuteronomy and the historical Jesus remind their people, our God isn’t too mysterious or remote. This God is already in our mouths and in our hearts. Luke’s Jesus, for instance, teaches that we are especially to find this God in those around us who are in need. And in the case of the good Samaritan, one doesn’t even have to be Jewish to discover that presence.

The irony is, as the author of Colossians reminds us, this divine presence is also encountered in a unique way in Jesus of Nazareth. His teachings about the significance of others eventually leads us to discover his own significance. He is the same “image of the invisible God” that he constantly surfaces in others. Though the author of Psalm 19 reflects on the importance of Yahweh’s laws, the prophets and Jesus are more comfortable reflecting on the importance of every one of us, more significant than any rule or regulation, no matter how sacred. No wonder Jesus based his reform on the Scriptures he heard Saturday after Saturday in his local synagogue. He didn’t have to go beyond them.

One of the original purposes of describing the deeds of the Jewish patriarchs in Genesis was to provide examples...
of proper behavior for the readers. These ancient stories were constant reminders to reform one’s life by imitating the ancestors’ characteristics. Nowhere is this clearer than in the first reading for the 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Hospitality is one of the pillars of Judaism (as it also was for early Christianity). In this well-known pericope, Abraham and Sarah don’t just respond generously when three traveling strangers ask for help. On the contrary, this first Jewish couple actually takes the initiative. Abraham (awakening from his siesta) “ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them” and treats them like royalty. He begs the trio to permit him to care for them. And there is no way they will receive leftovers. Abraham “picked out a tender, choice steer, and gave it to a servant, who quickly prepared it.” These strangers are about to take part in a banquet.

Of course, Sarah and Abraham will be justly rewarded for their generous hospitality. The child for whom they are longing will arrive in less than a year. The three travelers eventually end up being Yahweh. (Three, not so much because of the Trinity, but because our sacred author is convinced that it takes more than one person to represent God’s magnitude.)

That magnitude, as I mentioned above, is an ongoing process. The author of Colossians has already experienced the phenomenon of growth. Speaking in the person of Paul of Tarsus, he or she reflects on what imitating Jesus’ suffering has already brought. His body, the church, is just one outward sign of that growth. But there is a drawback: Anyone who ministers to the church must be committed to suffering with the church. Such growth doesn’t come cheap.

Luke can’t provide a better example than Martha and Mary. His Jesus not only accepts the sisters’ hospitality, but he, like Yahweh, insists on rewarding them for it. His gift doesn’t revolve around a child, but around both women’s personalities. No longer are they locked into the cultural and gender expectations of their day and age. Now both women are free to be the individuals God gifts them to be. In Mary’s case, she is empowered to engage in something only men had been permitted to engage: study and learning. She’s empowered to follow through on the “part” she chooses. Jesus’ reforms are so liberal that his followers are best warned to hold their breaths. Not even the author of Psalm 15 comes anywhere near experiencing the expanding implications of actually living in the presence of Yahweh.

Not only does the Genesis 18 passage heard on the 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time praise Jewish superiority in “haggling,” it brings up a faith characteristic we often forget: wrestling with God.

The authors of our Hebrew Scriptures frequently battled with proponents of “magic”; those who claimed special actions or series of words guaranteed God would do whatever they asked. If used correctly — especially in fertility rituals — they never failed. It was parallel to tying God’s hands behind God’s back, like discovering a piece of kryptonite that could control Superman.

Jewish prophets especially argued that Yahweh’s true followers wrestle with him/her, eschewing any hint of control. That belief was behind the well-known Genesis 32 passage in which Yahweh changes the patriarch’s name from Jacob (the trickster) to Israel (the God-wrestler). Authentic Israelites are committed to going at least two out of three falls with Yahweh every day.

Though we don’t like to admit it, our sacred authors’ condemnation includes such God-controlling practices in our own church as wearing a certain medal, saying a specific number of prayers in succession, or even receiving Communion on special days of the month, practices that guarantee we will eventually go to heaven. Though Luke cautions us that there is no one way to expect God’s Communion on special days of the month, practices that guarantee we will eventually go to heaven. Though Luke cautions us that there is no one way to expect God’s response to the prayers in our lives. Sometimes, we get what we ask of God, sometimes we don’t. Still, we pray confidently that we will always receive what is best for us and the people around us. The wrestling never stops.

In a must-read article “Not Everything ‘Biblical’ Is Christlike,” Stephen Mattson recently pointed out (2-27-19) in Sojourners (Search for the title: sojo.net) that Christians are expected to follow the person of the Christ, not a lineup of Bible quotes. Anyone can find Scripture verses totally at odds with the Galilean carpenter’s reform of his religion. Yet, as his followers, it is important that we continually surface those biblical theologies with which Jesus not only agreed, but which helped form his own mentality. After all, we are reading Scripture not to win a Bible trivia contest, but to help create a unique mentality, a value system which dovetails with the one Jesus of Nazareth developed and his followers passed on to us.

The Pauline disciple responsible for the Letter to the Colossians reminds us we are only doing what God asks of us by dying and rising with Jesus.

There are no shortcuts in accomplishing that end.
The Vision of a Gathered Celebrating Church
This end is also our beginning ...

By BIAGIO MAZZA

Unpacking and “breaking open” the word has been one of the most significant contributions of Celebration. So many people have done so much to help all of us appropriate the Scriptures of the Lectionary. The biblical movements that began long before the council took root and flowered throughout the council, and we have benefited from full immersion in the Scriptures ever since. Many will miss this gift that Celebration provided every month, but the mission is still ours. Scripture study is the soul of theology (Constitution on Divine Revelation #24) and a solid, firm foundation for immersion into the Sunday Eucharist. The council affirmed that at Eucharist we are nourished spiritually from two tables, the table of the Lord’s word and the table of the Lord’s body (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy #48).

Celebration also consistently reflected the language of Vatican II. In his book What Happened at Vatican II, John O’Malley states that the council was a language event — it spoke and used language unlike any previous council. Celebration revealed in that language and cultivated it so that all could be nourished and aided in unpacking the council’s vision of church and her liturgical life.

The council documents use words like “collaboration, partnership, freedom, dialogue, charism, dignity, holiness, conscience, collegiality, people of God, priesthood of all believers.” The pages of Celebration are filled with such wisdom and insights on a regular basis. Celebration explored and expanded on these concepts so as to engage all the people of God in the life of the church. We are called to continue making real what Celebration stood for in both language and intent, as it clearly articulated the council’s vision of church and its liturgical life.

Finally, with the pontificate of Pope Francis, we have a pope who is committed to living out both in word and deed the Vatican II vision of church. We see this especially in his vision of church as a field hospital, where all are welcomed without question, where hurts and injuries are cared for without conditions, and where the living presence of Christ is made tangible.

We go forth carrying on the work and mission that Celebration has dedicated itself to all these years, aware that this end is truly our beginning.

Biagio Mazza is pastoral associate at St. Sabina’s Parish in Belton, Missouri coordinating and facilitating adult faith formation. He is an author and contributor to commentaries on Scripture and the Sunday readings. He has a special interest in and has facilitated programs on Jewish-Christian and Muslim-Christian interaction. Email: biagio46@gmail.com
“I can do things you cannot, you can do things I cannot. Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.”

A scrap of paper with these encouraging thoughts, attributed to Mother Teresa, lived on my studio wall for many years. I love making art and love the community that I serve through it. Yet at times, thinking of everyone else doing the heavy lifting, the “real” work of the world, I have doubted my calling.

On his deathbed, St. Francis of Assisi freed his brothers — and me — by saying, “I have done what was mine to do, may Christ now teach you what you are to do.” I am incapable of being another Mother Teresa or Francis, but I can draw. So that is what I do.

Art can seem superfluous, but that doesn’t mean it is not essential. Even our ancient ancestors made time in their brief, harsh lives to decorate their tools, containers and bodies. Art feeds the soul. It is part of what makes us human.

Incarnation is a hallmark of Christian belief, and art is one of the ways God’s presence is enfleshed. Art has the power to bring us to our senses. At the same time, by grounding us in the present moment, much like attending a musical performance or spending time in nature, an encounter with art has the potential to be profoundly spiritual. For me, a visit to the art museum can be as inspiring as any worship service.

With deep humility, I recognize that the human and divine come together when I make art. Through what my brain, my eyes and my hand create, I sense there is more. My best work happens when I can relax a bit, let go and let God.

Here is a selection of my favorites from my almost 25 years with Celebration.

Originally appearing in Vatican 2 Today (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2004), I was especially happy when Celebration reprinted “Open Window” in January 2013, as I am very fond of this image inspired by Pope John XXIII’s bold vision to throw open the windows of the church and let the fresh air of the Spirit blow through. In this illustration, the open window also indicates the connection between the church and the world. I call this technique my “cut paper style,” even though the material I was cutting with an X-acto knife was actually thin plastic.

I created “Bread Lines” in 2005 for Celebration to convey that the Eucharist is more than a church ritual. We who are joined as the body of Christ are obliged to care for one another. I was touched to learn that a Catholic Worker house kept a print of this image in its chapel.

“Christmas Dawn” was another image created for Celebration and published December 2005 — this one in the loose, flowing, colorful style I developed around this time. I felt this technique was appropriate for Celebration and
JULY 7, 2019
14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

*Editor’s Note: Celebration provides the Revised Common Lectionary readings that align most closely with the Roman Lectionary.

Imagine

COMMENTSARY | Mary McGlone

The website “The Beatles Bible” dubs “Imagine” as John Lennon’s most iconic song. According to Wikipedia, Lennon once explained that it was an “anti-religious, anti-nationalistic, anti-conventional, anti-capitalistic” song that got “sugar-coated” into acceptability.

In 1971, Lennon canonized the idea that if only we could imagine a world not bound by heaven and hell, not looking to the transcendent, we could live for today, and everyone would be at peace. While the Vietnam War raged, young people whose rebellion boggled the minds of their elders celebrated the song as an anthem of what had to be eliminated. Lennon’s proposals came at the end of each verse: “living for today,” “living life in peace,” “sharing all the world.” His final goal: “And the world will live as one.”

Today, we will hear a 2,500-year-old version of something similar and yet radically different. While Lennon was suggesting that some version of socialist anarchy could solve the world’s problems, the prophet Isaiah promotes awareness of God’s love as the way to human flourishing and joy. Lennon wants to be rid of dreams of heaven. Isaiah wants people to imagine how God’s loving power working through them can satisfy all human hungers.

If Isaiah’s vision also sounds like a sugar-coated dream, Jesus brings the invitation down to earth as he sends the 72 evangelists out to proclaim the reign of God. From the get-go, Jesus tells them to pray for more missionaries because there is too much for so few of them to do. Rather than fantasize about simplistic harmony, he lays it out for them with the stark realism of a prophet: I am sending you out as lambs among wolves. (How is this for a vocation poster: “Enjoy the excitement and challenge of being lambs among wolves”?)

Every profession has standards, and the church specifies the gender and educational requirements for different ministries. Jesus, too, demanded certain qualifications of those who would represent him. In order to further his mission, they had to be ready to go out, carrying “no money bag, no sack, no sandals . . . .” They weren’t to dawdle along the way; they were to stay with the first person who offered them hospitality and never complain about the food. (There’s no pension plan because there’s no retirement.)

Their job description? Teach: “The kingdom of God is at hand.” Do it by curing the sick and sharing your peace. And to those inclined to retribution, he said, “Whatever town does not receive you, go out into the streets and say, ‘The dust of your town that clings to our feet, even that we shake off against you.’ ” So there!

Jesus gives them no catechism from which to teach. It all rests on healing the broken, along with that elusive command to share their peace. Evangelization in Jesus’ style is a ministry of presence; the way his missionaries are with others is their first and strongest proclamation of the kingdom of God coming to life. They do good. Eventually, after people have been hooked by the joy of their way of life, they invite them to be followers of Jesus.

The experience of one of my Romanian friends explains this for me. She entered religious life while their church was illegal; celebrating the liturgy could
get you arrested, and secret communities of monks and nuns operating underground constantly risked imprisonment. She had been working in a factory where some other young women workers attracted her attention simply by some intangible quality of their presence. As she got to know them and asked what made them different, they admitted that they were believers. One day, they invited her to pray with them at their apartment. Time went on and trust grew. They eventually admitted that they belonged to a secret religious congregation and invited her to join them. Being lambs among wolves, they had learned to evangelize by presence and only much later by formal invitations to discipleship.

People who evangelize by their presence are recognizable first by their freedom. They can hang out with anyone, without concern for what others might think or say. They notice needs and respond to them with whatever power they have. They aren’t anti-establishment as much as they are utterly unimpressed by power, prestige and glittery stuff. They live in today, knowing that tomorrow is beyond their control and that the future holds invincible promise.

Lambs among wolves? Without a doubt, but they are convinced that concern for their own hide only ties them down. They have learned to imagine a world where everyone can flourish because it starts happening wherever they show up. If people reject their message, there is no argument, no revenge, they just dust off their shoes and move on. Imagine that.

**People who evangelize by their presence are recognizable first by their freedom.**

The author of the last chapter of the Book of Isaiah attempts to reassure the people that no matter how improbable it seems, God is really working out their salvation. Isaiah’s people were feeling as if God’s work had been truncated. As Claus Westermann explained in Isaiah 40-66, they feared that “salvation had come to a stop half-way along the road. But now … begins … birth, for it is the work of God.”

Earlier in this chapter, Isaiah had proclaimed the coming glory of Jerusalem. Now, the emphasis switches to God, the only source of genuine salvation. Jerusalem, the city of God, remains the place where it happens, but salvation is a work of grace, not the result of human effort or urban planning. At the same time, people need to recognize, accept and collaborate with what God is offering. Therefore, Isaiah tries to open the people’s imagination to God’s style of salvation.

Isaiah begins with the image of God’s salvation as comparable to a nurturing mother. God’s will is that people know the comfort of having just exactly what they need, as though they were babes nursing on their mothers’ wealth of milk. They will be loved like toddlers cuddling on their parents’ laps, like the babies that fathers carry outside the house so that all can admire them.

God says, “Lo, I will spread prosperity over Jerusalem like a river.” The word here translated as “prosperity” is what we write as shalom, most often translated as peace. When we understand prosperity in the sense of shalom, it calls forth images of the fulfillment of creation, in which everything and everyone reach the pinnacle of their potential; they prosper in mutually life-giving relationships with one another.

Isaiah’s proclamation has a dual purpose. First, as mentioned, he is reassuring the people that God has not forgotten them. His images of God’s tender care reinforce that message. Secondly, Isaiah uses these images — and so many others through the three parts of the Book of Isaiah — to open people’s imagination. It is too easy for people of any epoch to have a limited, excessively self-referent image of salvation. Isaiah reminds us that God will care for us in ways that exceed our hopes and enlarge our dreams.

**PS 66:1-3, 4-5, 6-7, 16, 20**

Psalm 66 gives us the opportunity to sing with all our heart in thanks for what God does. We can think of God’s deeds here as the down payment on Isaiah’s “shalom-society,” the freedom given us by Christ’s love that Paul proclaims, and the coming of God’s kingdom that the Gospel invites us to announce.

In order to sing the first two verses meaningfully, we should prepare by recalling our own awareness of God’s great deeds. These may be very personal, but even the most personal lead us to the communal. In our creed, we proclaim that God has been active on behalf of the world from the first days of creation, giving us concrete signs of love through “all things visible and invisible.” When we pause to consider just exactly what we mean by that, we deepen our prayer and our ongoing awareness of God’s love.

The third verse of today’s psalm selection reminds us of how God led the people of Israel into freedom. In so doing, it invites us to recall ways in which awareness of God’s love has freed us. That opens us to the message we hear from Paul’s letter to the Galatians.

We can sing our final verse as a proclamation of our readiness to go out like the 72 disciples Jesus commissions in today’s Gospel. Using this verse as a guideline reminds us that the proclamation is always about God, not ourselves or any human institution.

**GAL 6:14-18**

Paul uses the last lines of his Letter to the Galatians to recap and underline his main message: All that matters in this life is the new creation. The new creation is what Paul described in Galatians 3:28-29, a world in which “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one
in Christ Jesus.” It is a world in which those who belong to Christ all become “Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to the promise.”

For Paul, all of the old way, good yet flawed as it was, has passed away. The only religious practice that has value now is identification with Christ and his cross. If there were a stronger way for Paul to say this, he would have found it — and repeated it.

When Paul says that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision mean anything, he is telling his people that no work of the law makes any difference in the long run. He is not promoting anarchy nor anticipating Martin Luther’s famous injunction, “Sin boldly!” Rather, Paul anticipates Luther who went on to say, “Believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly.” In other words, neither your righteousness nor your sin is decisive. Your attachment to Christ is what makes all the difference.

For Paul, circumcision symbolizes the entire system of law through which some people assumed they could attain salvation. Paul, who once excelled in that school of thought, now sees the law primarily as a trap of self-justification. Paul claims that he can boast in nothing except the cross of Christ, that is, nothing but the salvation offered by Christ. No one can earn or deserve the free gift God offers in Christ. That is Paul’s “gospel,” his good news.

While today’s Christians may see the whole question of circumcision as an ancient and possibly sexist hang-up, the underlying issue is basic to every religious practice. In Paul’s theology, God gave the law to reveal the goal of life, which we could summarize by the word righteousness, meaning the relationships that structure a world characterized by what Isaiah described as shalom. But human beings almost inevitably distort the law, turning the guide to loving relationships into something like an achievement test or grading system. Thus, what should have led to communion among people and with God becomes degraded into a set of measurable standards that lead people to become self-righteous and judgmental.

When Paul says that the world has been crucified to him, he means that the whole system of judgment and exclusion is dead. All that matters is Christ’s forgiving love. According to Paul, if any of us is going to be proud of our skin, it should be for the scars left by suffering for the sake of Christ. Nothing else has value.

Paul’s challenge to us is his teaching that the only thing that matters, the only thing about which we should boast, is God’s love revealed in Christ. People who believe this truth will live in a way that the new creation becomes a visible, experiential reality in their company. Paul’s hope is that the church will be this kind of company.

**LK 10:1-12, 17-20**

Because Lent started so late this year, we skipped over parts of the Gospel of Luke that we generally hear in Cycle C of the liturgical year — any selections that came between Luke 7 and 10. Today, we hear Jesus commission the 72 disciples, a story Luke wrote as a complement to the mission of the 12 in Chapter 9. Luke doesn’t often repeat stories. (Note that he has only one account of the miraculous sharing, while Matthew and Mark each describe two slightly different versions.) If Luke gives us two renditions of the mission of his disciples, he has done so with something specific in mind.

The most notable difference between the two accounts is the number of disciples Jesus sent. In Luke 9, Jesus sent out the 12; now he sends 72. Jesus goes into more detail about the mission of the 72 than he did for the 12. In both cases, the missionaries are to travel light, heal the sick, and announce that the kingdom of God is at hand. But with the 72, even as Jesus prepares them for the mission, he warns that they will be like lambs among wolves. He then tells them to ask God to send additional workers to help with the harvest.

One reason for Luke’s two accounts of the sending is that they reinforce the fact that Jesus’ mission began with his own people and was then to go out into the whole world. Although the various lists of the apostles’ names do not always match, the main point is that they are 12, representing Israel with her traditional 12 tribes. The 72 are, first of all, many more — and still not enough. Secondly, according to the Septuagint’s translation of Genesis 10, 72 is the number of the nations of the world. Luke’s point is that this mission involves the entire world.

In contrast to the contemporary church that sets up its bureaucracy with coffee and copy machines, budgets and annual appeals, and vestments for every rank and feast day, Jesus sent the disciples out with the bare minimum in terms of material goods. Rather than be encumbered by stuff that they would have to care for, they had only their proclamation and the power to demonstrate what it meant by healing the sick.

As Joseph Fitzmyer points out in his Anchor Bible Commentary, Luke constructed the dialogue between Jesus and the successful missionaries with great care. Lest the disciples become intoxicated with their newfound powers, Jesus tells them, “Do not rejoice because the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice because your names are written in heaven.” The real point of the reign of God is union with God. Power is a dangerous thing, but the assurance that God loves you and that you have a future with God is the antidote to getting hooked on power and puts the battle with evil in its proper perspective.

When the 72 return, they report, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us because of your name!” Jesus replies, “I have observed Satan fall like lightning from the sky.” Fitzmyer tells us that Jesus is not speaking of a vision, but rather of what he has observed of the results of the disciples’ mission. Satan, humanity’s traditional accuser and tempter, is overcome by the disciples, who lead others to freedom in Jesus’ name. This declaration assures us that there is no adversary equal to the grace of Christ. When the church genuinely proclaims the reign of God, nothing can overcome it.
HOMILY | Eric S. Fought

The international fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous began in 1935 when two men, Bill W. and Dr. Bob S., met in the home of a mutual friend in Akron, Ohio. Medical professionals, friends, family members, clergy and the men’s spouses all described Bill and Dr. Bob as “hopeless cases,” likely to die from alcoholism, a disease of the body, mind and spirit. The key for Dr. Bob was that he found in Bill, and many other alcohols he would encounter during the rest of days, a fellow traveler, someone who truly understood what it — alcoholism — was like. And Bill found in Dr. Bob, and countless alcohols he would meet over the remainder of his life, someone whom he could help simply by sharing his own experience, strength and hope.

The program of Alcoholics Anonymous, and the many 12-step fellowships that have been created over the years, are based on the principle that alcoholics and addicts stay clean and sober by reaching out to others and giving away what they have been given. It was through attraction, and not promotion, that the fellowship grew from two idealistic drunks to an organization with a presence in more than 180 countries around the globe.

In today’s Gospel text, Jesus sends 72 disciples out into the world. It is, indeed, an unusually specific numeric reference. But, perhaps more important than the number 72 is the number two. The disciples were sent out to minister in pairs.

This is good news for sure. After all, it wasn’t going to be an easy life. Lambs among wolves … no money bag, no sandals or sack to carry anything of value with you. All that the disciples had was themselves, their faith in Jesus, and their ministry partner:

In the life of discipleship, the question is not what you need but who.

We don’t walk this journey alone. We need each other — for support, encouragement, a listening ear; perhaps even advice at times. We learn from the experience of others who have walked before us, and we share our own experience with those who walk with us.

In our current context, the harvest that is in need of reaping is the tremendous pain that so many carry around each day. Our opportunity, as followers of Jesus, is to go out into the world (from the comfort of our pews and our homes) and bring with us open hearts, listening ears and a prayerful presence. With that presence, with those ears and with our hearts, we can harvest much that burdens our neighbors.

However, we will only be able to really help those who are hurting if we are authentic about the pain we carry ourselves. In sharing our own experiences of grief, mental illness, economic insecurity, addiction, strains on our families, and other challenges that cause us hurt, others can relate. And in relating, they are not only meeting us, but meeting Jesus, who has sent us out ahead of him.

People who are hurting — all of us — need to know that the kingdom of God is at hand. That should not instill further fear and shame, but hope. For the kingdom of our God brings love, liberation, reconciliation and resurrection. Too often, and for too long, we have failed to share such a hope-filled message. And now, more than ever, we need to get it right.

And in so doing, by going out into the world two-by-two, we can bring hope to that hurting, bruised and broken world. Along the way, we, too, will be helped, for just as one alcoholic helping another alcoholic keeps both sober, one hurting child of God helping another will keep both in the loving arms of their Creator. The laborers will grow, not through promotion, but through attraction, to the liberating, life-giving movement of discipleship we tend to call the church.

INCLUDING YOUTH | Jim Auer

Parents and other authority figures have perennially delivered this message to youth: “It’s dangerous out there! The world is full of bad people and bad ideas that can ruin your lives.” Youth have perennially replied, “It’s not dangerous out there — it’s fun and exciting.”

Jesus seems to make an observation even more extreme: “Behold, I am sending you like lambs among wolves.” Even lambs trained in Tae Kwan Do don’t stand a chance against wolves. While protectiveness can certainly be overdone, its need is not based on groundless fantasy. Faith has to be strong to withstand the wolves of amorality and hedonism.

CONNECTIONS | Dick Folger

Today’s Gospel is a prime directive for all Christians. Jesus sends us out. Our human responses vary greatly. Some “in-your-face evangelists” station themselves on street corners with cardboard “Jesus Saves” signs. Some, in pairs, go door-to-door to share invitations and literature; others email inspirational messages to friends, volunteer for good causes, write a check or silently wear a cross from their necks. There is comfort in the quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the Gospel at all times and if necessary, use words.”

God will surely be with us as he was when a miraculous ceasefire gave Mother Teresa time to lead a rescue of mentally disabled children trapped in a Beirut war zone.
Another Person’s Skin

COMMENTARY | Mary McGlone

We usually refer to today’s Gospel story as the story of the good Samaritan. But the person at the center, the one who most likely represents us and needs to learn something, is the lawyer Jesus wouldn’t let off the hook. Luke doesn’t name him, so let’s call him “Roger.” That is in honor of Roger B. Taney, the Catholic Chief Justice of the Supreme Court who delivered the 1857 Dred Scott Decision ruling that former slaves and their descendants could not enjoy the rights of American citizenship. Even if Roger wasn’t as discriminatory as Taney, neither was he much like Atticus Finch, the saintly lawyer/father in To Kill a Mockingbird. Atticus taught that you have to climb into another person’s skin and walk around in it before you can understand him. Roger the lawyer of today’s Gospel was more concerned about his own birthright than anyone else’s skin.

The first thing Jesus probably noticed about Roger was that he didn’t understand God’s law. Unlike the penal code or voting regulations that legalize discrimination, the law was Judaism’s greatest treasure. The purpose of the law — the whole of the Torah, both the written and the oral tradition — was to bring the chosen people ever closer to one another and to God. That’s why their psalms sang that the law was refreshing, trustworthy, enlightening, even sweeter than honey.

These feelings express the Jewish understanding of the law as a covenant of love between God and humanity. Unfortunately, Roger had it all upside down. Just notice his first question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

We might suspect that he was waiting for Jesus to say, “You’ve got nothing to worry about. Everybody can see that you’ve already pulled yourself up by your own bootstraps!” But Jesus didn’t say that, nor did he critique Roger’s erroneous assumptions about earning an inheritance (a gift one receives because of the circumstances of birth rather than a reward for effort or achievement).

Luke describes Roger as a “scholar of the law,” maybe even a straight A student. When Jesus asked him how he understood the law, he recited the answer by chapter and verse. Roger explained that all that is required of people is to love God with everything they have and know, with all they are and hope to be — and to love their neighbor in the same way. Jesus agreed. Roger had repeated the correct answer.

As if to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that he either didn’t believe in or didn’t understand what he had just said, Roger asked, “Who is my neighbor?” Everyone knows what the question really meant. Roger wanted to know the limits. He was asking, “Just how far are we supposed to take this business of loving with our whole heart, mind and strength? What’s really required?”

Seeing that philosophical answers and debates would go nowhere, Jesus told a story. He explained that a fellow, somebody Roger could identify with, was on a road trip when a gang mugged him, took his clothes, his identification and everything he had. With that, the traveler’s social status vanished. Suddenly, he was nothing but a wounded nobody. When people of his own kind came along, they didn’t perceive that he was one of them. Jesus carefully explained that the
passersby maintained their distance, not budging from their secure position on the opposite side of his misery.

We know the rest of the story. A contemptible foreigner saw the wounded victim as someone in need of help. Discerning the signs of the times on his road, the Samaritan reassessed his own position and identity. The circumstances led him to see himself as someone who had oil and wine, a beast and some money. These facts led to what seemed to him an obvious conclusion: He had all that was needed to respond. He took that to mean that he had a responsibility, and he put no limits on what he would do to fulfill it.

When Jesus asked Roger what the law required, Roger quoted Israel's Shema, the daily prayer that proclaimed that Jews were to love God with their entire being. Roger then added the command to love others from the holiness code found in Leviticus, a passage that begins with God's demand: “Be holy, because I am holy” (Leviticus 11:45).

God’s holiness is made visible in love. Atticus Finch would explain that by saying God took on human skin out of love, to teach us how to love one another. If we want to receive God’s life, all that is required is that we walk our road, willing to love with our whole heart and mind and strength. That is all God asks of us.

**DT 30:10-14**

Chapter 30 of Deuteronomy begins with Moses’ promise that grace is available to anyone who will turn to God. Moses’ good news culminates in the promise that “God will circumcise your hearts...so that you will love the Lord, your God, with your whole heart and your whole being, in order that you may live” (Deuteronomy 30:6). There is no better promise for human flourishing than that.

In today’s selection, Moses assures his people that they are fully capable of listening to the Lord, of keeping God’s commandments, and returning to God with all they are. Stephen Cook in *Reading Deuteronomy* explains that this passage demonstrates that “God’s revelation is relevant as is; it is intelligible.” He adds that, “The Book of Deuteronomy knows nothing of elitism or asceticism.” The point is that we do not need great visionaries or philosophers to know how to live a fully human life that is pleasing to God.

We might understand this reading as Moses’ down-to-earth summary of the law. In the past, Moses had heard the thundering voice of God, and his people were terrified by the signs and wonders they saw. But those events were extraordinary. Human beings wouldn’t accomplish anything if such extraordinary occurrences were their daily fare. Moses wanted his people to understand that ordinary life was where they could live in God’s grace.

For some, Moses’ message is a comfort. But for many — in our own time as well as in Moses’ day — the message presents an enigmatic combination of disillusionment and challenge. We can be disillusioned because we want our religion to be difficult, extraordinary and otherworldly. The thought that saints without halos live on our block deflates our fascination with awe and mystery. We prefer saints with the stigmata to firefighters injured on the job.

At the same time, the realization that we are each called to holiness can feel like an overwhelming challenge. In spite of its awful defects and dangers, clericalism offers us an escape hatch: They are the ones who should give the example, live holy lives, etc. When we can shift the responsibility to the “religious professionals,” everybody else can take a pass — or at least we can highlight the flaws among the priests and religious and claim that if they don’t measure up, what can be expected of us ordinary people?

Moses debunks those attitudes. God’s law is not up in the sky so that you have to be a mystic astronomer to understand it. It is not across some sea so that we have to get an ecclesiastical passport and take a cruise to find it. “No,” Moses admonishes them, essentially saying, “God’s ways are in your very bones. It is your nature as a human to live the way God intended, you just tend to distort it in ways you think will make you content but end up bringing misery to you and those around you.”

In the long run, Moses is saying, “If you want to know how to be holy and happy, search your heart.” Augustine in *The Confessions of St. Augustine* said the same thing, “Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee.” We can translate them both as saying, “Love, and do what you will” (Augustine, Sermon on the First Epistle of John 4:4-12).

**PS 19:8, 9, 10, 11**

When we think of law, we tend to imagine things like speed limits and radar or Title IX requirements for equality of opportunity. When psalmists speak of the law, they think of the Torah, which is, at minimum, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (the Pentateuch) and, more broadly, God’s revelation in written and oral tradition.

Psalm 19:11 advertises the flavor the Torah leaves in the mouth of those who love it. “Sweeter than honey” is hardly a phrase we would use for most laws, but the psalmists invite us to taste the Torah, the law of the Lord, as God’s gift to humanity. They know how sweet it is to live in harmony with one another and God.

When we sing that the decree of the Lord is trustworthy, we are saying that we trust in our relationship with God. God’s ways give joy to our heart and light to our eyes. We summarize what it means to live in relationship with God by singing, “Your words, O Lord, are Spirit and life.”

**COL 1:15-20**

This passage is a hymn honoring Christ. That gives it certain qualities and limitations. It was also composed — whether by Paul or others — long before the time of the “Christological controversies” that tried to describe Christ’s relationship to God or trinitarian theology. While the teachings that came out of those debates may have
found support in this and other Christian Scriptures, Paul did not address questions of dogma in this song. With that in mind, we can ask, what was Paul saying that has relevance to us and our worship?

First, let us consider the idea of a hymn. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal reminds us of what every romantic knows without being told: “Singing is the sign of the heart’s joy.” And it quotes Augustine as saying, “Singing is for one who loves” (#39). We sing and dance and clap our hands when the emotion and meaning of our prayer exceed what the intellect can express; it all overflows into bodily expression. With that as the backdrop to this selection, we can listen to it as an expression of love rather than doctrine.

Paul begins by saying that Christ is the image of the invisible God. He is proposing this idea to people who, like us, had never seen Christ in the flesh. Remember, Paul’s writings say almost nothing about the life and ministry of Jesus; his theology centers on the cross and resurrection. As the rest of the hymn bears out, Paul wants us to see Christ as the image of God, not simply in the way that all of creation images its maker; but as God’s ultimate, most tangible, self-revelation. As God’s self-revelation, Christ reveals God as creator and reconciler.

Paul describes Christ as active in ongoing creation, creating spirit and matter; all things visible and invisible. When Paul says that all things hold together in Christ, he is drawing on the image of Proverbs 8:22-35, “The Lord begot me, the beginning of his works… I was beside him as artisan… whoever finds me finds life.” Two millennia after Paul wrote, Teilhard de Chardin offered a variation on these ideas, depicting Christ in ongoing creation. Teilhard wrote of Christ: “I am the principle of union, the soul of the world. At play throughout the expanding space-time, I am the force… that… nurtures each newly created form, urging each one to multiply, to beautify, and to bear fruit.” (See Kathleen Duffy in Ilia Delio, ed. Christianity and Evolution, 28.)

Having begun with a meditation on the Cosmic Christ, Paul turns around and underlines Jesus’ saving activity as the revealer of God’s reconciling love, a love demonstrated through the cross and resurrection. Paul knows that the cross is the most iconoclastic self-revelation God can offer a humanity perennially prone to self-aggrandizement. Thus, Paul underlines the idea that the fullness of divinity dwelt in the crucified and risen Christ. The Gospel of John communicates this idea by showing us Jesus, the Master and Lord, washing the feet of the disciples.

The hymn to Christ that we hear today encourages us to wonder and marvel at God’s astonishing revelation of godliness. The two dimensions of the hymn converge to balance one another in our imagination. When we think of the grandeur of the creator of the universe, this hymn reminds us that Christ revealed divine love in vulnerable self-giving. When we contemplate the crucified Jesus, we see him in the light of the Christ, who holds all creation together from the beginning. Allowing these images to illumine one another, we contemplate the truth that in God all things are possible.

**LK 10:25-37**

We can take this little incident, unique to the Gospel of Luke, in a multitude of directions because it touches almost every theme in the Gospel. The scene opens with a lawyer addressing Jesus. Luke tells us the two key things that sum up the lawyer’s attitude. He was testing Jesus and he was self-righteous. When Luke says that the lawyer was testing Jesus, he uses the same word Jesus used in reply to the devil in the desert: “You shall not put the Lord … to the test” (italics added). Luke sees the story of this testing lawyer as an example of humanity’s propensity to fence in God’s love and its requirements. Of course, anyone who has read the Gospels knows that self-righteous people who test Jesus are setting themselves up for an object lesson in humility. The wind is about to be vacuumed out of the lawyer’s sails.

“What is written in the law? How do you read it?” Jesus’ counter-questions obliged the lawyer to articulate his own understanding of the covenant. The lawyer answered that the law demands absolute love of God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and a similar love of neighbor (Leviticus 19:18). The citation from Leviticus comes in the context of Chapter 19, which God summarizes by saying: “Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.” This reminds Israel that because they are created in God’s image, their vocation is to be like their God.

Jesus affirmed the lawyer’s answer, and their agreement on the requirements of the commands set the stage for the next question. Deuteronomy specifically called on God’s people to love their own. (The etymology of the word neighbor in English and Latin-based languages refers specifically to those who are nearby, implying that we should care for those we hang out with.) Jesus’ story challenges that narrow interpretation. He suggests that the neighbor is anyone we see who is in need.

This presents an almost overwhelming challenge in an age of global communications. How are we to respond to all the needs we can see today? The Samaritan exhibited two essential qualities that made him a true neighbor. First, he saw the injured man as one like himself. Not knowing his name, faith or past reputation, he saw him simply as a brother in need. Secondly, the Samaritan saw his own possessions and time as potential gifts rather than treasures to be guarded. When we see the needs of our global neighbors, the first thing necessary is to remember that we are all part of the same family and to allow that to discomfort us. Then, with the weight of the neighbor in our heart, we can assess what we have in goods, talent, influence, etc. that we can use to make a difference for the ones in need. We can’t do it all, but doing something makes all the difference to the ones we touch. Such action is the most striking way to proclaim the Gospel.
HOMILY | Megan Black

When we tell fables and stories, we often include lots of dialogue and details that give us insight into the interior motivations of the central characters. Think about the classic fable of “The Tortoise and the Hare,” which gives us the hare’s internal monologue to clue us in to his arrogance, narcissism and complacency. The details serve as signposts that guide us to the storyteller’s ultimate purpose.

Many of the tales told in the Bible don’t include this level of detail. They share only the most relevant of details — this man was a priest, that man was a Samaritan — and they focus on the actions that move the story along, leaving us to fill in the rest.

The story of the good Samaritan is a famous example of this. We don’t know a lot about the main characters — only their status in society and the fact that they were all traveling down the same road in Judea on the same day. So we tend to imagine the priest and the Levite as if they were like the hare — smug and arrogant, obviously villains.

But the absence of any other character details means that it is just as possible that the priest was overworked and emotionally exhausted when he came upon the man. And perhaps the Levite was responding to an urgent summons from his pregnant daughter and was preoccupied by his worry and haste.

What then? If the priest and the Levite are decent humans just like us, then what was the Samaritan’s super-power? Let’s return to the details Jesus gives us and fill in a little bit of what we know about human nature.

The priest and the Levite travel along the road to Jericho, which is dangerous, but their social status provides some assurance, and they are in their own land. They come upon the beaten man, and they likely feel a twinge of sympathy, but they also think something along the lines of “too bad for him” and feel mild gratification that this person’s plight is not their own. Each crosses the road and returns to his own worries and concerns.

The Samaritan comes along. He is cautious, very aware of his vulnerability as a despised outsider: He has avoided making eye contact with people on the road so far, not wanting to draw attention. To distract himself, he thinks about how much he is looking forward to celebrating the holiday with his cousins in Jericho before returning home to Samaria.

Then, he comes upon the half-dead man on the side of the road, and he sees the same fears he is been trying to contain in himself come to life in painful and explicit detail. “But for the grace of God go I,” you might imagine him whispering.

He gets to work, pulling oil and wine out of his bag and dressing the man’s wounds. He tends each one as if it was his own, knowing that tomorrow it very well could be.

When Jesus says that the Samaritan was “moved” with compassion to treat the neighbor as himself, he implicitly suggests that many of us may feel compassion without being moved to action by it, as the priest and the Levite likely were. We feel compassion from a distance, with our social status, privileges, self-concern and platitudes serving as buffers that protect our pain from other people’s pain.

But the Samaritan was so present to his own vulnerability, his own limitations, his own deep dependence on the mercy and goodwill of others that he was able to feel the victim’s pain as his own, and his feeling of compassion became a radical act of solidarity and kinship.

The Scriptures tell us time and again that we must love our neighbor as ourselves, and in this Gospel story Jesus suggests to us that in order to do this, we must be willing to look past our titles, uniforms, masks and responsibilities to see ourselves in our neighbors.

INCLUDING YOUTH | Jim Auer

Move the setting from the road to Jericho to a sidewalk near your church, a corridor at school, or a jogging path. Along the path is someone who has been mugged or who is lying unconscious from an unknown cause. Any member of the assembly would certainly attempt to help, following the “… command … very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts.”

But if the victim is not a few feet away but several miles or hundreds of miles, does that really cancel our obligation to help?

Cite various possible situations and possible ways to help.

CONNECTIONS | Dick Folger

Today, we hear the famous story of the good Samaritan. After telling how the priest, Levite and Samaritan responded to the robbed and beaten man at the side of the road, Jesus asks the scholar of the law, “Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers’ victim?” This Gospel is a kind of midterm exam on our journey to eternity. How have we responded in similar circumstances? Were we like the priest or Levite who avoided the confrontation? Or have we, like the Samaritan, acted out of compassion? In our life situations, have we offered to help, to listen, to care? Jesus challenges the scholar of the law, and us, to be like the compassionate Samaritan: “Go and do likewise.”
Scripture tells of plenty of conflicts between brothers. It began with Cain and Abel and then seemed to be a generational curse with Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau and finally the colorful eleven-to-one saga of Joseph and his brothers. Moses and Aaron apparently got along, but in the Christian Scriptures we hear that even Jesus’ own family thought he had lost his mind (Mark 3:21). Luke, who strives to give women equal billing, is the only evangelist to show us Martha and Mary’s domestic struggles.

Most representations of the sisters depict Martha as offering food, while Mary remains intent on Jesus’ presence and word. Some artists depict only the three main characters; others include Lazarus or a multitude of guests in the scene. One contemporary pen and ink depiction by Maria Laughlin shows Martha and Mary facing Jesus, whom we do not see. Martha is standing behind Mary holding high a tray with a loaf and a pitcher, while Mary sits in front of her with her eyes downcast, holding a book. Martha’s eyes are wide-open and challenging, almost to the point of saying, “Go ahead, dare me. I’ll drop it all on her head!”

Claudio Pastro, a Brazilian artist, created a unique icon of Mary, Martha, Jesus and Lazarus, in which Jesus is seated in the middle with his left arm around Lazarus. Martha stands by Jesus’ right hand, which is raised in blessing, and Mary is seated on the ground at the feet of the other three. All four are clothed in white, and the three siblings are looking at Jesus. Martha’s face expresses the most tenderness as she holds out a bowl of steaming food for the rest. Martha’s feet, like Jesus’, seem poised for movement, while Lazarus is standing steady and Mary is seated, giving no indication that she will move anything other than her head.

In Pastro’s icon, Martha’s stance and the movements of her hands make her appear most like Jesus. That, of course, goes counter to the majority of interpretations that take Jesus’ reply to Martha as a call to pay more attention to contemplation than to the menu, table and stove.

Artistic depictions are meditations on a subject. Like the kind of contemplation Ignatius of Loyola taught his friends, they invite us into the story so that we can become part of the interaction with Jesus and the others.

The most obvious question we might ask Jesus about this incident is why he criticized Martha’s concern for service just after he told the parable about the generous Samaritan — in contrast to the priest and Levite who concentrated on anything but the physical needs of another. The traditional response suggests that Jesus was indicating the superiority of the contemplative life over the active, but he did not say that and his life itself didn’t give witness to it.

Jesus lived a very active life — moving from town to town, being a thorn in the side to Pharisees, eating with anyone who invited him and often saying provocative things while at table. Matthew, Mark and Luke also portray him escaping to pray alone. But even when he tried to escape for time with the disciples, he abandoned their retreat time to respond to the crowds that sought them out. How does his lifestyle help us understand his conversation with Martha?

JULY 2019 | Sunday Folios
Martha wanted Jesus to tell her sister to get to work, but Jesus says nothing to Mary. Instead, he notes how harried Martha is. She had taken the bold step of inviting Jesus into her home (no mention of a chaperoning brother in this story), and she was concerned to fulfill what Jesus expected of those who received missionaries—to give him a place to stay and something to eat.

When Jesus sent his disciples out on mission, he told them to share their peace, to stay with anyone who received them, and to eat whatever was served. Martha invited Jesus, but quickly became “burdened with much serving.” The one thing she lacked was the psychic space to receive his peace—and that’s what tranquil Mary seemed to be soaking up at his feet.

Jesus had accepted Martha’s invitation, and it seemed that what he wanted in a meal from her was real presence, the one thing she was too busy to give. Faith tells us that Christ’s presence means little if we stay too busy to reflect on the idea that Paul expresses by saying, “in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.”

The author of this selection from Genesis wants us to sit back and enjoy this story without worrying about details that don’t match or theological concepts that developed centuries later. For now, all we need to do is listen to a story about God’s interaction with Abraham. Of course, God’s relationship with Abraham automatically brings Sarah into the picture.

As the story opens, Abraham is seated “by the terebinth of Mamre.” A terebinth is a tree like an oak. Mamre seems to refer to a region that may have been named for a chieftain friendly to Abraham. So, here we have Abraham sitting in the shade at the entrance to his tent—the best place to be on a hot desert afternoon. Suddenly, three strangers appeared. Since Abraham’s tent had no door; standing in the open functioned as the equivalent of knocking.

A paragon of hospitality, Abraham rushed up to them, bowed as low as an old man could, and asked if they would honor him by refreshing themselves and staying for a little food. Abraham immediately got the elderly Sarah working to fulfill his offer of hospitality. He told her they needed a bushel (40-60 pounds) of flour to prepare some rolls; he sent servants to slaughter a steer (500 pounds or more) so they could prepare a little meat.

Cooking a feast of those proportions gave Abraham and the visitors plenty of time to get to know one another. That would become obvious both in their promise to him and Abraham’s later bargaining session with their leader. After resting and eating, the visitors repaid the couples’ generosity by promising that Sarah would bear a son, satisfying the one desire the couple had always felt but had never been able to fulfill.

Unfortunately, the Lectionary skips over the details of Sarah’s story (Genesis 18:10b-15). Those verses go on to explain that while the men visited, Sarah was sitting inside the tent where she could hear everything. Perhaps the visitors had not yet seen her; but the promise of her pregnancy sent her into a fit of laughter that caught their attention.

This little scene offers a commentary on faith. Sarah represents humanity who, upon hearing God’s ridiculous promises, laughs out loud. The laughter is not mocking, but incredulous; God’s promises are beyond human expectations and potential. When Sarah denies having giggled, the spokesman doesn’t take her to task, but simply assures the couple that nothing is too marvelous for the Lord to do. When we hear this reading in conjunction with today’s Gospel, the combination invites us to reflect on hospitality, on generosity, on faith, and on the fact that God will never be outdone in bestowing lavish love.

**GN 18:1-10a**

The psalm verses we pray today give concrete examples of righteousness. First of all, people who are just keep their hearts set on the truth. That demands discernment, and discernment calls each of us to question how our ego may be skewing our truth-seeking.

The interplay of ideas in the second stanza calls for careful consideration. The first phrase is easy enough, as it says that the just do not take up a reproach against a neighbor. The second, translated for us as, “by whom the reprobate is despised.” is a little more difficult to square with being signs of God’s love. The New Revised Standard Version translates it as, “in whose eyes the wicked are despised.” This translation offers a little more room for rejecting wickedness without writing off the perpetrator.

The verses that speak against collecting interest and bribery are fair warnings about any number of activities that value material goods or gain over the well-being of another human being. Those ideas lead us back to the beginning: To act justly is to create life-giving relationships. Those who seek to live that way will know God. Those who do not are avoiding God’s presence and influence.

**COL 1:24-28**

This selection is open to misinterpretation, centering on the idea that Paul expresses by saying, “in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.”
That sounds as if Paul, or whoever wrote in his name, is saying that Christ’s sacrifice left something undone. Because that is the diametric opposite of Paul’s basic theology, it must mean something else.

Questions about this passage touch the same nerve as questions about why Christians suffer and when the end will come. They lead into the heart of the mystery often referred to as the “already but not yet.” What happened in Christ tells the whole story, but it has yet to permeate all of history and thus the entire mystery of Christ’s life, death and resurrection continues to be active in history.

When Paul says, “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake,” he wants the Colossians to understand that nothing he must go through compares to his joy and fulfillment in bringing the Gospel to them. Paul has no qualms about admitting what Jesus told his disciples — if the Christ must suffer, his followers can expect to follow suit.

This is a particularly poignant message because Paul is writing from prison. We don’t know the extent of his sufferings there, but what we know of him assures us that being immobilized and prevented from traveling and preaching would have caused Paul great anguish. However, Paul is not looking for sympathy. Rather, he uses his own suffering as a sign that faith in Christ is no free ride to glory; it promises a share in his passion. Most of all, Paul believes that suffering, his for theirs sake and theirs for the sake of others, participates in the good that Christ’s suffering brings to humankind.

**Lk 10:38-42**

The story of Martha and Mary has been interpreted in very diverse ways. For some, it confirms that women belong in the kitchen or in quiet contemplation. That is part of the old hierarchical model that puts pope, bishops and priests at the top; contemplative women next; religious brothers and sisters after them. Then, if we bother to mention them, come the laity. For others, the Martha and Mary story demonstrates Jesus’ acceptance and promotion of women far beyond what his culture permitted.

In its context in Luke’s Gospel, this incident takes place shortly after Jesus decided to set his face for Jerusalem (Luke 9:51), when he deliberately began the journey that would lead to the culmination of his mission. By the time Jesus got to Martha’s village, he had been refused hospitality in a Samaritan village, taught about the demands of discipleship, sent out the 72 missionaries and received them back, and most recently had the encounter which led to the parable of the generous Samaritan. Now, Jesus enters a village where Martha receives him and gives him a missionary’s welcome in her home.

According to Jesus’ instructions to missionaries, when someone received them, they were to share their peace, accept the hospitality, and stay with their hosts until it was time to leave the village. So far; that seems to be what happened in Martha’s home.

Then, the action of this incident moves inside the house, often a symbol for the community or church. Now, things do not go smoothly. Luke doesn’t highlight Jesus’ countercultural decision to enter the home of two women to whom he was not related, which was taboo in his culture. A man could go into another man’s house without question, but since there is no mention of anyone else in the home, Jesus apparently accepted Martha’s invitation as if it had come from a male. Then Martha’s sister Mary took up the posture of a student/disciple, sitting at Jesus’ feet and listening to his teaching. At this point, Luke has depicted Jesus as interacting with two women who act as if they don’t know their place, and he seems to think nothing of it.

The tension of this story has nothing to do with the women’s failure to play their prescribed social roles. The problem is that Martha feels overburdened with her serving — in Greek, her *diakoneo*. When she turns to Jesus, he tells her she is too worried about “many things.” Martha is the first disciple Jesus advises not to worry; later he will say the same to those who risk arrest because of him (Luke 12:11). He also advises his disciples to avoid worry about their life, their food or clothes, because such worry can’t add a minute to their lives (Luke 12:22-30). Instead of the many things Martha is concerned about, Jesus says there is only one thing necessary, and Mary has chosen a good that he will not take away from her.

If this story had been remembered during a liturgy in a house church of Luke’s day, the participants would quickly compare it to the incident recorded in Acts 6, when problems about the distribution of food led the Twelve to say, “It is not right that we neglect the word of God to serve at table” (Acts 6:2). Their solution was to name deacons, disciples like Martha, who would make certain that everyone was fed.

The tension portrayed in this story has not disappeared. Some disciples strive to attend to all the details — the hungry need food and the refugees need shelter. At the same time, the tasks of *diakonia*, the constant commitment to respond to the needs of others, can become so burdensome that we lose touch with Christ and the Gospel for whom we started it all.

There is no single correct interpretation of the story of Martha and Mary. It seems that Luke sandwiched it between the story of the generous Samaritan and Jesus’ teaching on prayer to indicate that the tension itself is important. Martha and Mary both chose the good, but there can be too much of a good thing. Christian disciples must continually seek the balance.
HOMILY | Mary K. Whitacre

They were his close personal friends. Their home was a place where he could retreat to relax and regroup. Their radical hospitality made it his home away from home. So when Jesus stopped by to see them in Bethany, Martha and Mary welcomed him with open arms. They felt privileged and honored to have Jesus in their home. However, Martha and Mary had very different ideas about how to create the sacred space Jesus needed.

Quite frankly, most of us would do many of the same things that Martha did. If Jesus were coming for dinner, how many of us would sanitize the bathroom, de-clutter the living room, and set a “Martha” Stewart table? Wouldn’t we want the meal to be one that includes all of Jesus’ favorites, and one that a special guest deserves? Wouldn’t we do everything we could to make our home comfortable and inviting? Even more so for Martha, hospitality was a bedrock value in first-century Palestinian village life. It was a point of honor to welcome guests and offer them the best their home had to offer. We see an example of this in today’s first reading when God visited Abraham’s camp in the form of three travelers. Abraham and Sarah received them generously with desert hospitality.

It was Martha who opened up her home to Jesus and filled his hungry belly. Her ministry of hospitality was about creating sacred space. Thank goodness for all of the Marthas in our communities. We count on you women and men to show up with the casseroles, to do the jobs no one else will do, and to never drop the ball. You work faithfully, often behind the scenes, to set the stage for the sacred moments like Mary was enjoying with Jesus.

From a different perspective, Mary’s hospitality was about devoting her full attention to their treasured guest. Jesus had gifted them with his presence. She felt that not unwrapping and savoring this gift would be an insult to the giver. Mary chose to wholeheartedly engage with Jesus and to be nourished, enlightened and transformed by him. Our communities also depend on all of you Marys. You women and men intuitively listen with the ear of your heart, so that people feel really heard and understood. You walk with people in their pain, so they do not have to be alone in the mystery of suffering. You value and affirm each person, so they are encouraged to share their gifts with us. Mary’s hospitality ministry is one of contemplative listening presence, which sees the dignity of every human being, the extraordinary in the ordinary, and the image of God in each person. Through people like Mary, we build connections with God and each other.

Radical hospitality was a special hallmark of this family. Certainly, Jesus’ response to Martha’s complaint wasn’t implying it’s better to sit around while others do all the work. Could it be that Jesus was neither trying to admonish Martha for fretting over the dinner, nor accusing Mary of being lazy? Maybe it was not about either/or, but more of a both/and. It sounds like Jesus was thanking them both for their unique expressions of love, and recognizing that love has more than one right way. In a world that too often used or abused Jesus’ generosity, together both Martha’s and Mary’s styles of hospitality wrapped Jesus in a graced hug and made him feel special.

This Gospel story does not tell us what happened next. Did Martha see Jesus’ response to her complaint as an invitation to sit down and relax? Or did anyone get up to help Martha? Or maybe thanks to both of their acts of hospitality, they all sat down to a hearty, delicious meal and engaged in truly transformational conversation.

INCLUDED YOUTH | Jim Auer

This delightful Genesis story teases the audience. Yahweh is the announced visitor but comes in the person(s) of three men. Abraham flies into high gear to extend hospitality: comfort and a gourmet meal, personally served. It’s like a contemporary recording idol (e.g., Lady Gaga, Drake, Taylor Swift, Bruno Mars) suddenly showing up at a teen’s or a young adult’s door: Hospitality is not the province exclusively of homeowners or hosts, especially seen spiritually. Helping prepare (or clean up) meals at home — with or without company — is hospitality. Serving or cooking at a restaurant, flipping fast food burgers, operating the drive-thru — all have a spiritual dimension.

CONNECTIONS | Dick Folger

Today’s Gospel speaks loudly to women who have hosted Thanksgiving Day dinners stuck in the kitchen getting the meal ready, while everyone else sits in the living room talking and laughing. A friend spoke of how she had spent days shopping and preparing the turkey and then set the table with her finest china. An extra guest arrived and all were seated awaiting grace in a beautiful moment of “family.” Then, surveying the table, she realized there was no place for her to sit. She would have to grab a few bites in the kitchen all by herself. Though Jesus would identify time with family as the “better part,” he surely would have blessed the selfless cook who made the magnificent meal.
Teach Us to Pray

COMMENTARY | Mary McGlone

Today’s vignette from Genesis depicts Abraham at his most active, doing everything he can to prevent God from destroying the city of Sodom. God must have been thoroughly entertained as Abraham practiced his prayer of bargaining for the collective. Acting like an auctioneer in reverse, Abraham sang God’s praises while he kept lowering the price required to save the city.

While many people take the story of Sodom and Gomorrah as proof of God’s ire and readiness to punish sexual immorality, there is something much deeper at stake. We have all seen evidence that suggests one bad apple can spoil the bunch. In this story, Abraham asks God if a minority of good people can save the rest. Would God spare the city if there were 50 good people there ... or 40 ... or even just 10?

Jesus offers a complement to the scene with Abraham when he talks about prayer. First, Jesus teaches his disciples how he himself prays. He gives us a number of phrases that work together to sum up Christian life and mission. Beginning with the instruction to call upon the almighty Creator as “Father,” the next petition actually commits us to do all in our power to bring God’s kingdom to fruition in our time and place. We ask God to provide all we need, the bread of each day and the sustenance of a world in which forgiveness reigns over selfishness and revenge. Finally, like Jesus himself, we ask that we not be put to the final test, but that the cup of suffering pass us by — if that be God’s will.

That’s the prayer. Jesus then adds some illustrations about what it means in action. He weaves a parable about three people: One is seeking food, one is so poor that she or he has nothing to share, and the third wants to sleep through the entire drama. The poor person in the middle is a bit like Abraham — pleading with someone who has power to help a person in need. Abraham kept bargaining God down; the agitator in this parable won’t let the affluent person sleep in peace until the hungry are fed.

Jesus’ next teaching on prayer reworks what we hear in Matthew 7:7-11 and 18:19 — ask and you will receive. Jesus seems to promise that whatever Christians ask will be granted. Luke quotes those same promises as a commentary on the prayer Jesus has taught and the parable of the hungry, the seeker and the sleeper: Jesus’ teaching encourages the seeker to keep knocking until the seeker gives in and opens the cupboard for the hungry one.

As a commentary on the invitation to call on God as a father, Jesus referred to their own experience of parenthood. He didn’t say, “You give the kids everything they ask for,” but in effect, “Who among you would trick a child by giving her something that could kill her when she asked for food?” We can just imagine how some in the audience cringed when he threw out the idea of sneaking a snake into the hand of a child. Not even a mean big brother would let a little kid near a scorpion.

Jesus used those examples to refocus their imaginations from a fixation on what they wanted to a consideration of how a loving parent responds to children in need. Those illustrations were preparation for the clincher: “How much more will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?” (italics added).
Jesus tried to teach that prayer is an expression of a relationship between unequals. When as disciples of Jesus we call on God as Father, we stand in the center of an enigma: We are invited into trusting intimacy with the eternal Creator of the universe, whose name is so sacred that we cannot even pronounce it. That realization alone is enough to move us to the awe that proclaims, “Hallowed be your name!” Those two phrases set up the rest of the prayer to express our relationship with God as one of grateful dependence and committed obedience.

By sharing this style of praying, Jesus invites us to participate in his kind of relationship with the Father. When it comes to praying on behalf of others, the teaching about the seeker who knocked the sleeper out of bed teaches that when we pray for the needs of others, we oblige ourselves to do our part to respond, if only by disturbing those who have but do not share. In terms of our own needs, Jesus tells us to ask for whatever we want and that God will give us the Spirit, which is all we need. Most of all, the gist of Jesus’ teaching about prayer — and about everything else — is that God wants to give us what will give us life.

**GEN 18:20-32**

It rarely happens that the Lectionary gives us a nearly continuous reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, but today’s story of Abraham and God follows directly after last week’s story of Abraham’s lavish hospitality and God’s even more generous promise to Abraham and Sarah. This week’s story begins with the fact that God has heard the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah, cities that had become famous for their mistreatment of the foreigners who visited them.

Genesis 19 will tell the story of Abraham’s visitors who arrive in Sodom, where Lot, a foreigner in town, treats them to the same hospitality that Abraham had shown them. But then, the townspeople arrive to mistreat them, and nothing Lot does will dissuade them. Before the people get their hands on the strangers, they are struck blind, and the innocent are preserved from their clutches.

While some assume that Sodom’s sinfulness was all about sexuality, Ezekiel 16:49-50 describes their wickedness by saying they were “sated with food, complacent in prosperity … [giving no] help to the poor and needy … they became arrogant and committed abominations. In Luke 10:11-12, Jesus says Sodom was not as bad as the towns that reject his messengers. The outcry against Sodom that reached God had to do with their mistreatment of people in need. But in spite of all the attention history has given to Sodom’s sin, the point of this story lies elsewhere.

In a statement that sounds a lot like what God told Moses about hearing the cries of the enslaved Israelites, our anthropomorphic God tells Abraham that he has heard the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and is headed there to judge the situation for himself. The context of the story and what follows in Genesis 19 supply for the fact that God never specifically told Abraham of a plan to destroy Sodom, only that God was about to investigate.

Abraham understands that God is going to destroy the evil cities and begins to plead on behalf of the innocent. In a scene taken straight from the marketplace, where the buyer haggles with the seller to get the best price, Abraham bargains God down until he gets the promise that if there are only ten just people in the city, God will not destroy it.

Underneath the petitionary prayer and the rather primitive image of God as vengeful, unsure of what was happening in Sodom, and needing to be reminded of how to act like a real God, there is a theological idea being born. Everyone knows that evil spreads like mold. Abraham wants to know if God believes that goodness can do the same. Could a number of good people save the city? Let’s say 50, 40, 30, 20 or even 10?

With this story, Genesis introduces a question that runs through the Hebrew Scriptures. In Job, it is framed as the question of why the good suffer. Isaiah 53:5 teaches that the suffering of the just one can heal the sinner, but Ezekiel 14 seems to contradict that. Today’s Genesis story grapples with the thorny questions of reward and punishment and the suffering of the innocent.

Ultimately, the most important argument of the passage is not about how many just people are necessary to save the wicked, but about the character of God and, therefore, of godly people. Abraham’s back-and-forth with God dramatizes a perennial debate. On one side, are those who believe that no matter the collateral damage, it is godly to obliterate the wicked. On the other, are those who believe that the judge of all the world acts with justice and compassion. People of both ilks believe they are called to go and do likewise.

**PS 138:1-2, 2-3, 6-7, 7-8**

We sing almost the whole of this great thanksgiving psalm. The fact that the psalm speaks in the first person offers us the opportunity to make it a deeply personal prayer.

The opening lines call us to recall a particular moment when God answered our prayer. Once we are in touch with the emotion of that moment — perhaps joy or relief or a renewal of our faith — we are prepared to pray this with meaning. The verse goes on to proclaim that we want to express our thanks in the presence of the heavenly host and of any who would see us rejoicing in God’s Temple — or parish church.

The second verse recalls and praises God’s everlasting kindness, God’s faithful love. We give thanks that we can
be aware of God’s presence — and for the strength that gives us. The third verse reminds us that we call on God from our poverty. It also calls to mind the joy of Psalm 23, as it proclaims that God is present whenever we are in distress.

The last verse offers a clever combination of thanks and petition. We give thanks, at the same time reminding God that we are counting on more to come.

**COL 2:12-14**

Paul may have taken the ideas in this section of his letter from a hymn about baptism. The entire reading we hear today speaks of the effects of baptism. The first part explains the traditional symbolism of being submerged in the water as a symbolic way of being buried with Christ. That probably reflects the baptismal practice in Paul’s time when the baptized were generally adults. When ordinary cradle Catholics or mainline Protestants — people baptized as infants — read this, they may envy their brothers and sisters who receive baptism when they are old enough to understand and choose to participate in the ritual. The experience of the grace of the sacrament is uniquely vivid for people who opt to ritualize their conversion by symbolically dying and rising with Christ.

This reading invites those of us already baptized to revivify our awareness of the meaning of our baptism. It invites us to ask ourselves what it means to us personally to have died with Christ. It also asks what it means to be raised with him. It is well worth our time to consider what that dying and rising has meant and could mean in our lives.

The second part of our selection moves the focus from the baptized to God’s action on our behalf. In the first reading, Abraham questioned how God could allow the innocent to perish with the guilty. Now, Paul tells us that God saves us when we are not innocent. Paul says that the writ of accusation against us has been nailed to Christ’s cross. That is akin to saying that our bills have been sent to God’s bank account, which more than covers them.

Because of the way God has loved us, our transgressions count for naught. The question for us is, if we truly believe that, what concrete difference does it make in our lives? If we believe it of others, what does that tell us about how we assess them? Our responses to those questions will tell us a great deal about the faith we have in the power of God, who raised Christ from the dead.

**LK 11:1-13**

Luke’s Gospel narrative moves immediately from Jesus’ reply to Martha heard last Sunday to this section about prayer. Because of that, we can assume that the two incidents comment on one another.

Today’s Gospel opens with the disciples’ desire to learn Jesus’ way of praying. They had surely prayed with him by singing hymns and psalms in synagogue and Temple rituals, but they were also aware that he would occasion-ally retreat off by himself for a time of prayer. They who knew him as their teacher and leader now asked the most intimate question possible. In asking him to teach them to pray, they were asking him to teach them to relate to God in the same way that he did.

The first phrase Jesus taught them evokes the awesome mystery of the God whose self-revelation we treasure in the Judeo-Christian tradition. First, we address God simply as Father, or in Jesus’ maternal tongue, Abba. Although God was traditionally referred to as Israel’s father, a direct address to God with such familiarity was not typical of Jewish prayers. As Joseph Fitzmyer points out in the Anchor Bible Commentary on Luke, the traditional prayer of 18 petitions that Jews repeated three times daily began with the elaborate appellation, “Lord God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob! Most High, Creator of heaven and earth! Our Shield and the Shield of our fathers!” This is a far cry from the simple Abba.

Although Jesus invites us to begin our prayer with the most familiar address possible, he does not domesticate God. The next phrase reminds us that God is not just a buddy. “Hallowed be your name” calls forth the emotion referred to as fear of the Lord. With this phrase, we are asking that we never forget God’s grandeur — this is the Creator of the universe, the eternal Source of all being, yet this same hallowed One invites us to call out, “Abba!” The combination of calling God “Father” and hallowing God’s name might bring to mind the prayer before Communion when we say, I am not worthy, but your word will heal me. By the grace of God, we are invited to address God as Jesus did.

The next phrase, “your kingdom come,” summarizes the goal of Christian life. When we pray this with integrity, we are pledging ourselves unreservedly to the cause of Christ. With this petition, we situate ourselves in the presence of God as people intimately loved by the Almighty and fully committed to God’s cause.

The second half of the prayer acknowledges our dependence on God and our need of grace. Recognizing God as the Creator, we ask for what we need for today and tomorrow. The unusual phrase “daily bread” (epiousios) is unique to this Gospel, a word hinting that although we need daily bread to survive, we also need the bread of the morrow, the life-giving bread blessed and broken in community.

The double-pronged petition asking for and promising forgiveness becomes a formula for righteousness in the most positive sense. We ask God for forgiveness, recognizing that such a request necessarily entails reciprocity: I cannot hope for forgiveness if I withhold it.

The last petition — do not subject us to the final test — finds an echo on the Mount of Olives when Jesus asks to be spared the cup. As he taught his disciples to pray, so in his moment of testing, Jesus asked for it to pass, but he summed up his life’s work by saying, “Not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). This whole prayer summarizes Jesus relationship with God. By giving it to us, he invites us into that very same relationship.
It was the end of the world.
The earth, the moon, the sun, the whole solar system
had been obliterated to make room in heaven for the billions of people gathered together for the Last Judgment. No one looked very happy. A few looked pious—they were the ones who had it made, but they wouldn’t dare smile, lest they commit the sin of self-pride and lose their place in eternity. Most of the people looked worried, like grade-school children on the morning of receiving their report cards.

God had already judged a couple of billion people, and he still had a long way to go. And no one was really bored. No matter how many millions of times the same judgment was passed over and over, it was always interesting to see who went where and what the charges were.

Everything was going according to divine plan when suddenly there was a scuffle over where Mars used to be. It was a group of Catholics from Anytown. They were forcing their way up to the front of the crowd. God interrupted the proceedings to ask, “What seems to be the problem?”

“We’ve heard enough,” they said. “There’s someone missing from this crowd who should be judged.”

Now God was quite impressed to think that these people had surveyed the vast throng and found someone gone. God glanced at Michael the Archangel, who fidgeted a little. “Who is missing?” asked God. “Who should be judged?”

The people from Anytown looked God in the eye and said, “You!”

“On what charges?” asked God.

But God said, “When you pray, there are three possible answers: Yes, no and wait.”

“It’s not a yes or a no,” they said. “It’s a wait.”

“On not keeping a promise.” And with that, they produced a copy of the Gospel according to Luke and pointed to a passage they heard one Sunday in the summer of 2019. “Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened.” With that sentence, they accused God. “How do you plead?” they asked.

God replied, “I plead guilty of making the promise, not guilty of breaking it.”

Then, the people produced more evidence: Petitions they had made, novenas they had kept, prayer after prayer which got no answer.

But God said, “When you pray, there are three possible answers: Yes, no and wait. Every prayer you prayed did receive one of those answers. I know you didn’t like to wait—you stood in lines at grocery stores, you sat at stoplights, you raised children, you grieved losses, and always you wanted a quick solution. But when I promised you an answer, I never promised it would be fast.”

Then, God produced a book, not just Luke’s Gospel, but the whole Bible. “If you had looked a little farther,” he said, “you would have learned from your ancestors that holiness lies not in getting, but in waiting. Noah waited 40 days and 40 nights for sunshine, the Israelites waited 40 years for the promised land, the sick man waited 38 years by the pool of Siloam to be healed, Elizabeth waited 50 years before giving birth. Some waited until they died: Moses for the promised land, Job for a straight answer, Jonah for consolation, Jesus for the cup to pass.”

The people from Anytown looked at each other and then said, “OK, God, I guess you can judge us now.”

“I’ll be right with you,” God replied. “Just stand right over there and … wait.”

It is seldom advisable to argue with God or with a judge, but Abraham takes the chance with the persistence of a determined attorney. Good thing for the innocent in Sodom. While we cannot expect to manipulate God, we can use this tale as a springboard to prayer for the innocent.

Youth connections include advocating for women and children who are trafficked for sex, labor or forced military duty; the falsely accused for reasons of race, ethnicity or neighborhood; casualties of inadequate medical treatment and/or civil wars; victims of poverty, abusive homes and bullying.
did many covers in this style. In this illustration, I meant to express the reality of the Incarnation in a fresh, joyous and community-oriented way.

In creating “Leaven,” originally a black-and-white illustration of the parable of the yeast created for the book *Tell Me Your Story* (Liturgy Training Publications, 2002), I drafted my then teenage daughter to model for me. Since a digitally colorized version of it was featured on the cover of Celebration in April 2007, the original scratchboard illustration appeared in an exhibition honoring the vision of Dorothy Day at the Sheen Center in New York. It has even been reproduced as a bracelet charm by Contemplative Rebellion.

The image “Oscar Romero” was originally commissioned and published by Celebration for the July 2015 issue. Patrick Marrin, former editor of Celebration, encouraged me to develop this graphic portaiture style, and I created quite a few covers for Celebration using it. The image has since appeared on posters all over the world and was published as a book cover by Plough Press.

I created the image “Layers of Meaning” for Celebration, published February 2014. Though this illustration is unabashedly digital, I started by sketching, then cut basic shapes out of plastic with a knife. At that point I scanned them into my computer; added color and manipulated them in Photoshop. I felt the transparent layers of this technique would best convey the richness and depth of Scripture.

Originally created for Liturgical Press in 2010, “Flight,” the above Christmas season image, represents the Holy Family as Middle Eastern refugees, which, of course, they were. It was especially poignant when Celebration published it as the cover of the December 2016 issue during the Syrian refugee crisis with an accompanying feature article by Denise Simeone. National Catholic Reporter also used the image as their Christmas greeting that year.

My last cover for this final issue of Celebration seems appropriately called “Praise.”

Julie Lonneman divides her time between Bellingham, Washington and Cincinnati, Ohio. Her illustrations explore themes of spirituality and social justice and have appeared in publications throughout the world. Reproductions of these works and many more by Julie Lonneman are available through trinitystores.com. Explore her work at julielonneman.blogspot.com. Email: Lonneman.julie@gmail.com.
Empty, Open, Expectant Hands
The irreversible reforms of the council

By MELISSA NUSSBAUM

I read this recently in England’s The Tablet:

The Vatican’s most senior liturgical official says the practice of receiving communion on the hand is part of a “diabolical attack” on the Church which diminishes reverence to God.

Cardinal Robert Sarah, Prefect for the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, is now calling for Catholics to start receiving the host kneeling and on the tongue which he says is “more suited” to the sacrament.

Of all the reforms to come out of the Second Vatican Council, I am perhaps most grateful for the practice of receiving the host in my empty and open hands. Mass is one of the only places where my purse and my phone are impediments, not advantages. In the marketplace, my purse, with its many credit cards and insurance cards and ID cards, and my charged smartphone, make the way.

At Mass, they are impediments to receiving — they are in the way. I have to release them, put them down and leave them behind to walk forward, my hands open like a beggar, empty like a beggar. I have to wait my turn, something the purse and phone exist to help me expedite and get around. I have to go forward slowly, holding nothing, hiding nothing, having nothing, waiting for my hands to be filled. I try to leave my stuff at home. But usually I forget. Because, in many ways, that purse and that phone define me and connect me, keep me oriented to time and place. Mass is a different time and place. It requires a different orientation. There is nothing for sale. Where else do I go and find nothing for sale? Even my home has become part of the marketplace with online sales. At Mass, we are connected — the living and the dead, those in my parish and those throughout the world — but none of us are connected electronically. God speaks to us in many and varied ways there, not one of them through AT&T.

When I place my hands, cupped and cradled before the altar, and the body of Christ is placed there, I am grateful. I am grateful that my hands, unworthy though they are, receive before my mouth. For my hands have cradled babies and wiped noses and bottoms and rubbed backs. My hands have wrapped presents and opened doors and planted spring bulbs.

When I reach out to receive the cup with my hands, I am grateful. For my hands, unworthy though they are, have baked and brought food to neighbors and friends in need. My hands have served and cleaned and carried. My hands have soothed the brows of the fevered and wiped the tears of the weeping and grasped the hands of the mourning. My hands have lifted the elderly and caressed the faces of the dying. My hands have also done harm, but never the harm my tongue has done.

When I think of all that must be mended between me and those around me, I think of the damage I have done with my mouth. Words, wielded like a sword, meant to cut down and hold down and belittle and separate and confuse and wound. I have gossiped. I have accused. I have lied. The author of the epistle of James warns that “no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (3:8).

I am aware of the violence wrought by human hands, but I wonder how much of it was then, and still is, preceded by the violence wrought by human tongues. How often do we read another story of violence by someone whose violence came after years of abuse, much of it verbal? James also asks us to “[c]onsider how small a fire can set a huge forest ablaze. The tongue is also a fire. It exists among our members as a world of malice, defiling our whole body and setting the entire course of our lives on fire …” (3:5a-6a).

This is the last edition of Celebration, so our words are necessarily elegiac. We say goodbye to a publication that has joyfully examined the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, a publication that has merrily joined in the work of opening the windows of the church and allowing the sunlight to stream in. In my diocese, I hear more and more calls for postures of what is described as greater piety, among them kneeling communicants receiving the host on their tongues. It seems to me a call that is anthropologically dishonest, a call that refuses to consider the source of most human reverence and charity.

I pray that my hands, worn from work, will school my yet sleek tongue, and not the other way around. I pray that, in bringing food to a sister I dislike and distrust, my hands will teach my tongue to see the truth of the beloved child of God before me. And I hope Pope Francis’ statement on August 24, 2017 that the council’s reform of the liturgy is “irreversible” will be heard and received with open and expectant hands.

Melissa Musick Nussbaum is a teacher, author and speaker. She has been a regular columnist for Celebration and lives in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Email: mmnussbaum@comcast.net
Music: Full, Active, Conscious Participation in Liturgy

A parting reflection on the legacy of the Second Vatican Council

By J. MICHAEL McMAHON

For nearly 30 years, it has been my privilege to share with Celebration subscribers music suggestions for Sunday eucharistic celebrations — psalms, hymns and songs that foster the assembly’s full, active and conscious participation in the liturgy. I myself began using the music suggestions in Celebration when starting my first full-time parish music ministry position in 1976. Robert Thompson was the music editor at that time, and I was grateful for his guidance during the early years of my career. Never did it occur to me that I would succeed Bob in this position following his untimely death, nor did I expect to continue for so many years.

Much has changed for the better in liturgical music over the years that Celebration has been providing resources for worship planners. When Bob Thompson began offering music suggestions for this publication, he consistently offered not only hymns and songs, but also various options for singing the responsorial psalm for each Sunday. In this way, he gently encouraged communities to begin making this element musical at a time when it was more frequently spoken. That weekly reminder is no longer necessary, since singing the psalm at Sunday Mass has become the norm.

When Celebration was first introduced, Sunday Mass in most Roman Catholic communities may well have incorporated congregational singing, but most often it did not include sung psalms, acclamations and responses. Today, it is the norm rather than the exception for Catholics to attend Sunday Masses in which these parts are sung.

The quality and variety of appropriate music for the liturgy has also improved markedly in the years since the Second Vatican Council. Publishers of hymnals and worship resources have over the years paid greater attention to hymns and songs that accompany ritual actions of the liturgy, that express the spirit of the various seasons and feasts, and that draw on biblical and liturgical texts, including the Lectionary for Mass.

Celebration editor Denise Simeone suggested that in this final column I might reflect on the legacy of Vatican II regarding liturgical music. I would like to suggest two important areas of development that have sprung from the reforms of that council.

Among the lasting impacts of the council, the first is continued emphasis on active participation by the entire community in singing the liturgy. In The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the council insisted that active participation is the element to be considered before all else, that it is the right and duty of the baptized, and that singing is a primary mode of participation. The bishops who gathered at Vatican II viewed music neither as embellishment, enhancement, nor distraction, but rather as an integral dimension of the ritual action, as bearer of the liturgical texts, and as a language of communal participation. Subsequent liturgical documents and pastoral practice have reaffirmed this foundational principle, even if unevenly at times.

The second enduring legacy of Vatican II for liturgical music has been its ecumenical dimension. The council was itself conducted in an ecumenical spirit and issued teachings that fostered closer relationships with other Christians. As it also opened the door to liturgical celebrations in vernacular languages, the council indirectly fostered the sharing of music for worship among Catholics and Christians in other churches who shared not only a common language but a common faith.

This ecumenical legacy is evident by taking even a cursory glance at major hymnals used in churches of various denominations in the United States. On a typical Sunday, congregations of different denominations are often likely to be singing some of the same hymns after hearing the same Scripture readings.

While Catholics have borrowed hymns like “Now Thank We All Our God” and “All Creatures of Our God and King,” Protestants are just as likely to be singing “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” and “On Eagle’s Wings.” Gregorian chants are finding their way into the worship services of other Christians at the same time as spirituals and gospel songs are included in Sunday Mass at Catholic parishes. The responsorial style of singing psalms has found its way into major hymnals of various Protestant denominations while the metrical psalmody of Reformed Christians has found a place in Catholic worship (e.g., “All People That on Earth Do Dwell”; “O God, Our Help in Ages Past”). And, of course, the chants of the ecumenical monastic community of Taizé have enriched the congregational song of Christians of various traditions throughout the world.

It has been a joy to serve musicians, planners and worshiping communities as part of the Celebration family. Thank you for the opportunity to work together in promoting active participation through congregational song and in gathering God’s people together to live out their common faith and common baptism in witness and service. Sing a new song!

J. Michael McMahon has been Celebration’s music editor for almost 30 years and has served in full-time pastoral music ministry for more than 40 years. Email: jmichael.mcmahon@gmail.com
Collaboration is co-labor — hard work, sometimes bloody, needing the unity of focused attention, and always breathong through the tension and pain so that something new can be birthed. That image of collaboration has formed me; it formed us. It formed me.

I was formed by the Second Vatican Council, though at the time I did not exactly recognize that.

My parents were very involved in parish life in retreats, parish councils, and movements like Cursillo, Extension, and Christ Renews His Parish, among others. My parents watched reports of the council on television. They read about the sessions. They went to parish classes. I remember them talking about all of it with excitement. In grade school, we practiced the new Mass responses.

In high school in Cleveland, I was taught by the Sisters of St. Joseph. We studied the council documents in our classes. During those years, the sisters began to wear “secular” clothing, tailored suits that were skillfully handmade. There was energy and some anxiety; looking back I can only imagine the struggle over some choosing to remain in the habit and others not. But I saw faithful witness to the call of the council. There was growth and there was tension. Something new was being birthed. It was palpable, tangible.

It formed me.

I was caught by the vision of that council, as so many were, as it was being articulated in my classes, in discussions, in what I saw around me. My friends and I went to youth retreats, then planned and led them. We participated in discussion groups led by Extension adults about Scripture passages, about Jesus’ message, and how to live as God wanted us to live. I played guitar and sang with groups at Mass. All of this led me to Eucharist and to praying with an intergenerational community gathering around a table.

It formed me.

Anxiety, tension and struggle were reflected in my continued education through schooling with Dominican Sisters and at a Jesuit university. Theology classes, where church ministers of all ages and varieties of “vocational” living rubbed shoulders, produced evocative discussions that had a vitality and a fresh spirit.

It formed me.

The movement of Vatican II shaped my life work. I chose a vocational call to work within the church. That call was recognized by some and called “playing at ministry” by others. I worked with and was mentored by teams of sisters, brothers, priests and other lay men and women who were trying to articulate a call to work within the church but who didn’t fit the previous ways that ministry had happened. My story is our story. Something new was being birthed. And believe me, there was tension, struggle and hard collaborative work. It formed me; it formed us.

Collaboration is co-labor — hard work, sometimes bloody, needing the unity of focused attention, and always breathing through the tension and pain so that something new can be birthed. That image of collaboration has been true in my work in church, and I have witnessed its wonderful fruit.

I spent 30 years in parish and diocesan ministry in two different dioceses, followed by work in mission at National Catholic Reporter and as editor of Celebration these last few years. Once, a young campus minister asked me, “How could the church have squandered its inheritance?” referring to the lay ministers who wanted to be a part of the institutional framework of church ministry, leadership and authority — not for personal gain, but as a partner. Yet they were not often welcomed. I didn’t have an answer, though I said that even though the institutional part of the church had not welcomed his collaboration, his university and countless other churches and communities have welcomed it.

What I came to understand in my years of work in and on the outskirts of the church is that the greatest gift Vatican II gave to me was my faith in my baptism. I am called to act in the world, to follow Jesus Christ, to acknowledge the Spirit of God inviting and sometimes dragging me where she wills because I have been baptized. Baptism is the sacrament we all share that unites us. People can be set on fire by understanding this. We take our rightful place as members of the body of Christ, called by name, inspired by the Spirit, sent on mission. In my collaboration with religiously professed brothers and sisters and ordained deacons, priests and bishops, Baptism unites us.

We have been formed by the work, insight, dialogue and struggle of the Second Vatican Council. Our church — the institution, the people of God, the community — all of the church has been shaped by that work and the ongoing birthing of it. There was enthusiasm, joy, hope, grief, anxiety, pain and difficulty for the people of this age. But that struggle formed us, and one thing is clear — the council documents brought fresh air and new birth about our work and our mission in the world.

Just yesterday, I received a phone call at NCR in my role as director of mission from a man who began by strongly protesting the work we do. Vehemently questioning our mission; he went on about the way liturgy is celebrated, guitars and drums in church, contemporary theologians — his list was long. And he was 20 years younger than me. But he was a man of faith. This man is our brother, a child of the same God I hold close. And this is the work of ongoing dialogue begun at the council. How we gather around the table, break open the word of God together, and share the bread and wine, particularly with those with whom we disagree and even clash — that is our work and that is our baptismal call. And it will form us.

May we go in peace out of the church doors and into the world to love and serve the people that our God has given us.

Denise Simeone has been editor of Celebration since 2016.
**PLANNING | Lawrence E. Mick**

It is difficult to read the first reading today without thinking of God in female categories. The prophet Isaiah speaks first of Jerusalem in feminine terms, inviting us to “nurse with delight at her abundant breasts!” But then, he has God speak, “as a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you.” Whether you think of God as female or not, this certainly suggests that God treats us with a mother’s love.

Efforts at updating our official prayer texts with inclusive language were somewhat stymied by the poor translation of the Missal that was forced on us several years ago. But that should not keep us from paying attention to the issue when preaching or composing prayers or even choosing among options for prayer texts when they are available. If you think it doesn’t matter very much, talk to a group of women, especially younger women, in your parish. There is no good reason for us to continue using language that makes many members of the assembly feel ignored or devalued.

Preachers and planners might enter into a covenant to challenge each other on this issue. Could planners point out to presiders and preachers when they slip into exclusive male terms for God or for the community? Could presiders do the same when they hear such language in petitions or songs or even announcements at Mass? It is hard to make the shift, so this is not a matter of chastising one another but of helping each other to grow in awareness and break inappropriate habits of speech.

This applies first of all to terms that reference members of the assembly, but it is also an issue in how we speak of God. It can be tricky, but it is not impossible to avoid male terms for God except when speaking specifically of the Father or the Son. One simple change is simply to repeat “God” or “God’s” instead of “he” or “his.” It may feel a bit awkward at first, but that is a small price to pay for reminding ourselves that God is not male or female. No image of God is ever adequate to comprehend God, but when we envision God as exclusively male or female, we are surely not seeing the true God.

Another theme that we might see in today’s readings is the global reach of God’s concern and thus the global scope of the church’s mission. The psalm refrain reminds us that all the Earth should rejoice in God’s gifts. God’s care extends far beyond Jerusalem to every corner of the globe. The Gospel reminds us of our mission to reach out to others with the good news of God’s love. Just as Jesus sent out the 72 disciples, so Christ sends us out to lead others to God. Let those issues find a place in the petitions today.

**PRAYERS | Joan DeMerchant**

**INTRODUCTION**

Journeys dominate today’s readings — from the return of the exiled to a destroyed Jerusalem, to the disciples setting out to preach the Gospel to the world. Both will be fraught with peril, hardship and pain. Even Paul’s missionary work is centered in Christ’s crucifixion. We, too, are called to be people moving into the world to live the Gospel. Like our ancestors, we rely on love, peace and mercy to sustain us.

**PENITENTIAL ACT**

Lord Jesus, you sent the disciples on a mission to the whole world: Lord, have mercy.

Christ Jesus, you warned them, like laborers and lambs, of the perils ahead: Christ, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, you invite us to share the Gospel wherever we are going: Lord, have mercy.

**SCRIPTURE READINGS**

Is 66:10-14c God is like a comforting mother to those returning from exile
Ps 66 Let all the earth cry out with joy
Gal 6:14-18 The heart of the Gospel is not circumcision but Christ’s crucifixion
Lk 10:1-12, 17-20 The disciples are sent to spread the Gospel to the world

**PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL**

Minister Let us pray for all who journey into unknown or challenging territory.
Presider That as a whole church we may embrace the work of proclaiming the Gospel in our time and place — knowing that it may indeed be difficult, we pray:
◆ For all Christians living in perilous situations, whether engaging in missionary work in areas of hostility, war or political unrest, or striving to live the Gospel with integrity in the midst of radically different cultural values, we pray:
◆ For those who are embarrassed or afraid to share their faith, those living in doubt, those not yet confident in their faith, we pray:
◆ For those who challenge God’s inclusive care for all, who do not realize that living the Gospel is difficult, or who do not see the connection between the Gospel and politics, lifestyle or social issues, we pray:
◆ For resolution to struggles within the church that distract us from our calling to spread the good news to those who yearn to hear it, we pray:
◆ For those who are too sick, worried or burdened with the challenges of life to be able to find joy and meaning in living the Gospel, we pray:
Presider Consoling God, we hear your sometimes uncomfortable call to us to step out in faith wherever we are in life. Give us the courage to respond to that call, confident in the love, peace and mercy you have shown to those who walked before us. We ask this in the name of your beloved Son, Jesus. Amen.
PLANNING | Lawrence E. Mick

If last Sunday’s first reading prompted us to rethink our image of and language about God, our text from St. Paul today might lead us to a deeper understanding of Christ. Most people tend to use “Jesus” and “Christ” as interchangeable names for the same person. Paul and many subsequent theologians suggest a different view. They sometimes speak of the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. We cannot fully separate them, of course.

Jesus is the Christ, which is translated “the anointed one.” But Paul describes a Christ who existed before the historical Jesus and whose reach extends to the end of time: “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” In this larger perspective, Jesus is the human incarnation, the human flesh of the Christ, while Christ is the plan of God for the whole universe from the beginning. Paul says, “in him all things hold together.” Unity is the beginning of creation (think of the Big Bang from a single point) and the goal of creation. And that unity includes unity among people and other parts of creation as well as unity between God and creation.

The Gospel parable reminds us of the scope of God’s plan and the primary means of its fulfillment. Salvation is not limited to one nation or race or people. Even enemies like the Jews and Samaritans have to come together. And the means of creating such unity is love. “Who is my neighbor?” the Jewish scholar asks. The proper question is “Who is not my neighbor?” We all come from the same source and are destined to the same fulfillment in Christ. How can we exclude anyone from our love and concern?

This focus on unity is also supported by Paul’s reminder that Christ is the head of the body, the church. If we are one body, then we all have to care for one another and learn to live in harmony.

This, of course, is an ideal that is never fully realized in human affairs. Dissension and disagreement are an inevitable part of the human experience. Yet these do not excuse us from loving and caring. Jesus commanded us to love even our enemies, so we surely should care for our brothers and sisters even when we disagree.

So how do we communicate such ideas and vision to the parish? Certainly, preaching about the cosmic Christ can help. Prayers can lift up the call to unity in Christ. But perhaps we also need to ask ourselves if we as parish ministers give witness to the quest for unity in our own actions and interactions. Example speaks louder than words! If your own example seems weak in this area, what can you do to foster better unity as a team of ministers?

PRAYERS | Joan DeMerchant

INTRODUCTION

Figuring out how to live in faith can sometimes create a confusion of copious rules, regulations, practices and prohibitions. The reality, however, is a rather simple “heart and soul” thing. Loving and responding to God cannot happen apart from loving one’s neighbor with deep compassion. Today’s Gospel reminds us that the neighbor might not be the one we would choose to love. The good Samaritan story is a cautionary tale that catches our attention for good reason.

PENITENTIAL ACT

Lord Jesus, you understood the deepest meaning of the law and the commandments: Lord, have mercy.

Christ Jesus, you challenge us to examine who is truly our neighbor: Christ, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, you call us to live with compassion for the most marginalized: Lord, have mercy.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Dt 30:10-14 Moses’ instruction to fully live God’s commandments
Ps 19 Your words, Lord, are Spirit and life
Col 1:15-20 A hymn extolling faith rooted in Christ
Lk 10:25-37 The greatest commandment of all is compassionate love of neighbor

PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

Presider Let us pray now that our faith may be rooted and expressed in the great commandment.

Minister For a church committed to compassion, love and care, which supersedes all other concerns, including power, authority and institutional issues, we pray:

❖ For a willingness to explore our role in a culture where many narrowly decide who are neighbors, where neighborhoods are judged safe or unsafe, where people congregate only with those who meet their social, religious or political expectations, we pray:

❖ For those whose lives are lived in constant fear, who have never experienced safety or compassion, who feel they belong nowhere and are loved by no one, we pray:

❖ For programs that bestow dignity on those who need it most and focus more on care than cost, we pray:

❖ For those whose faith is rooted in rigid practices or keeping the rules, who have not experienced the power of helping those in need, or are unable to see how we are united as children of God, we pray:

❖ For all in this community who are sick, suffering, grieving or in any kind of need, especially those whose needs we have not yet discovered or addressed, we pray:

Presider God of love, your precepts are described as perfect, right and pure, refreshing the soul. They are given in the simple but demanding command to love you and others by our actions. Help us to follow your Son, who demonstrated the power of this love. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.
It’s mid-summer and prime vacation time. Some of you may be sitting in your tent like Abraham, or campers may be joining you for worship this weekend. Some may be on a longer journey, just stopping on their travels to worship with you.

In ancient times, hospitality was a primary virtue, and this incident with Abraham and Sarah stands as a prime lesson for succeeding generations, including our own. The Letter to the Hebrews says, “Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels.” Some suggest the three men who appear to Abraham might be angels or even the Trinity, but in any case, one of them is identified as the Lord.

We often think of our responsibility to welcome the stranger, but we might also remember that strangers often bring gifts to us. Visitors increase the size of our assembly and may even increase the collection! But they also bring us gifts just by being themselves and sharing a bit of their lives with us. Some newcomers might not be travelers but people looking for a church home, and they have gifts to share with us on an ongoing basis if they are welcomed.

The same point applies to our attitudes toward immigrants. A view that sees immigrants as only a problem or a burden or a threat is simply false. Immigrants have enriched the United States and other countries in countless ways in every generation. Sure, there are a few bad actors in any group, but crime by immigrants is less frequent than crime perpetrated by longtime residents. Immigrants bring personal gifts and the gifts of their differing cultures. They keep society vibrant and creative. In most developed countries, immigrants are essential to the future, as birth rates no longer sustain current populations. We need workers and we need new citizens. Hospitality applies not just to church on Sunday but to our neighborhoods and cities, as well as to our regions, states and countries. Fearmongering and hatred should have no place among those who claim to follow Christ.

So how can parish leaders counteract the fearmongering that is increasingly shaping countries and the world? Preachers must reject timidity and preach God’s word fully. If our faith does not shape the way we treat other people, both personally and communally, then our faith is dead. We cannot stand by and let the forces of hatred have free reign.

Planners, too, must be willing to challenge people to embrace the word of God, even when that may bring opposition. When people are scared, they often react in unchristian ways. Leaders need to show them a better way and nurture a more honest and loving vision. Let the preaching and songs and prayers today guide people to a rich and deep hospitality toward all God’s people and all God’s creatures!
Every time I read or hear today’s first reading, I chuckle or smile. This passage strikes me as one of the most humorous passages in the Bible. To understand it, we need to recognize that Abraham is dealing with God like a buyer in a Middle Eastern market, haggling over the price for what he wants. He pleads, he cajoles, he grovels and he uses clever shifts in his negotiating pattern to convince God to spare Sodom. God, in turn, plays along, humoring Abraham until God begins to get impatient with Abraham’s insistence.

I like the passage not only for its humor but because it exemplifies the kind of boldness in approaching God that the Letter to the Hebrews urges: “So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help” (4:16). Abraham is not afraid to haggle with God; he is comfortable in God’s presence.

We can also see this in the prayer that Jesus taught us. When we pray, we are to call God our Father — not a threatening force or an angry master or an unapproachable king.

What might this evidence in Scripture teach us about our behavior in church? I have heard that passage from Genesis many times in church, but I have never heard anyone laugh. I have told a joke in the homily in some parishes, where the best response I got was a slight smile. We seem so afraid to be ourselves, to be really human, in church. Is this really how our loving God wants to act in God’s presence?

In some other cultures, Sunday Mass is a rich celebration with lots of singing and dancing and smiles and even laughter. Perhaps we in the U.S. are still too influenced by a Puritan past to be that free. Whatever the reason, planners and presiders and other parish leaders might spend some time exploring the mood and style of worship in the parish. Is it a deeply human experience or does it require people to leave their emotions and normal behaviors at the door? Could this be part of the reason that young people are deserting our churches?

If you discern that things need to change, how might you start? Would encouraging people to chat quietly in church before Mass begins be a first step? Could preachers find a way to encourage a bit of laughter in a homily? Would livelier music help? Could people be encouraged to clap and/or sway with such music? Can children be enlisted to break down some barriers, e.g. offering a hug to some of the older members before Mass or at the sign of peace? This might all be common in your parish, but further growth is likely still possible. Where will you begin?

INTRODUCTION

Prayer has been a key component of faith for thousands of years. While prayer can be uniquely personal, today’s readings provide some essential and expansive insights about it from both Judaism and early Christianity. Abraham and Jesus both extol the importance of persistence, and Jesus teaches us that prayer at its best is communal. We pray as one body of God’s people. Most profoundly, we dare to pray at all because God is loving and just.

PENITENTIAL ACT

Lord Jesus, your prayer flowed from your deep, personal relationship with the Father: Lord, have mercy.

Christ Jesus, you taught the disciples to pray as you prayed: Christ, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, you invite us, as one people, to this same kind of prayer: Lord, have mercy.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Gen 18:20-32 Abraham intercedes with God on behalf of Sodom
Ps 138 Lord, on the day I called for help, you answered me
Col 2:12-14 The baptized participate in Christ’s death and resurrection
Lk 11:1-13 Jesus teaches the disciples how to pray

PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

Presider We are a praying people, and we pray now for the needs of the whole world.

Minister For the church in need of prayer and renewal; for those who have been hurt by the church; and those — ordained or lay — who will lead us forward, we pray:

❖ For those who do not know how to pray or have no community to pray with; for the imprisoned or endangered, sick or lonely, discouraged or depressed, we pray:
❖ For those who have lost faith in the power of prayer; or for whom prayer has become automatic or formulaic; and for parishes where liturgy or prayer experiences are rushed or impersonal, we pray:
❖ For those who believe that God must respond to our wishes and requests, or who believe that God prefers particular languages or postures; for openness to new approaches to prayer; we pray:
❖ For those called to lead and enrich the prayer of the community; for pastors and liturgists, liturgical ministers and musicians, teachers and writers; and for parents teaching their children to pray, we pray:
❖ For all in this community who need someone to pray for them; and for the awareness that we might be the answer to prayer for someone in need, we pray: Presider Loving God, we dare to come to you as we have been taught, connected to one another and to you through prayer. The boldness of our ancestors precedes us, and we trust in whatever outcomes you grant us. We do this in the name of Jesus, who encourages us to pray. Amen.