Women and Leadership in Paul
Co-workers in the early Christian communities

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Sometimes a request seems simple enough, but it often involves a winding road! The editors of National Catholic Reporter forwarded a request from a long-time subscriber who was trying to find two songs for a memorial service for his wife of almost 50 years. He wanted to know if Celebration could help.

Upon calling the subscriber, hearing about his loss and his wife’s memorial, he stated that one song was from the 1970’s. He didn’t know the song’s title, but he could sing a few lines of it.

In the 1960’s, I was a typical high school guitar player of the folk music era. Drawn in by youth retreats, I had also begun playing liturgical music. Once he sang part of the song, I recognized the melody somewhere in my memory.

Celebration has long offered suggestions for music for Sundays and feasts as well as articles on seasonal music and developing the ministry with the assembly. Trusting in the decades of experience of Celebration’s editor of music, Mike McMahon was my first call.

Mike quickly identified one of the hymns and offered the publisher and a link for the subscriber. But the other song eluded both of us. Thus, began our internet hunt! Though Mike’s initial suggestions were not a match, my exploration uncovered a YouTube video of a song written by Joe Wise in 1975. To our delight, the subscriber confirmed that Remember Me was the one he had recalled. Now to find the music!

Mike Mathews, Celebration’s associate editor, took over the hunt. While we struggled to find a current source of the sheet music, he found a website of Joe Wise who was now doing retreat work in Arizona. Uncertain if he’d receive a reply, Mike sent an email. Lo and behold, Joe himself answered! He shared his sympathy for the man’s loss as well as provided a link to the music.

A remarkable journey of musical memory and linked people. It brought to mind the power of music, especially its role in ritual moments.

Whether it is a part of Sunday celebration, a funeral, wedding or retreat experience, music has the amazing energy and capability to connect us and stir our imagination.
Women and Leadership in Paul’s Social Network

Gospel-proclaiming co-workers in the early Christian communities

By Christine Schenk

Introduction
Many, if not most, Christians believe that women had little or no part to play in the rapid growth of early Christianity. If they ever heard of Phoebe the diaconos (Romans 16), they chalk her up as a minor player in the spread of the Gospel. In fact, Phoebe was a respected benefactor and leader of the church at Cenchreae. Her financial patronage probably helped underwrite Paul’s mission. A number of early Christian communities whose foundations are commonly credited to Paul would not have existed were it not for female founders and leaders such as Lydia, Eunodia and Syntyche at Philippi; Nympha at Laodicea; Phoebe and Prisca, who with her husband Aquila co-founded house churches in Corinth, Ephesus and Rome.

The witness of these Gospel-proclaiming women should be a source of inspiration for today’s Christians. Instead, many wrongly believe that Paul actively suppressed women’s evangelizing initiative by forbidding them to teach men and to be submissively silent (1 Timothy 2:11-13). In this article, I hope to reset our mental models so we can see and celebrate the authority and leadership of women in the earliest Christian communities. In the process, we may also gain a new perspective on Paul, who — far from suppressing female teaching and evangelizing — worked alongside women in proclaiming the Gospel throughout the Mediterranean world.

Women in The Greco-Roman World
On Feb. 14, 2007 during a general papal audience, Pope Benedict XVI made the rather remarkable statement that “the history of Christianity would have turned out very differently without the contribution of women” and the “female presence was anything but secondary.” This observation could be interpreted as another way of saying that the influence of early Christian women was either primary or equal to that of Christian men. Yet, most would have difficulty believing women had any influence whatsoever in the world of the early Christians since so few women ever appear in the historical record. There are complex reasons for this, not least being the cultural expectations governing female behavior.

Although defined differently in different locales, identification of men with the public arena and women with the private or domestic domain was widespread throughout the empire. Underlying this expectation were honor/shame conventions in which a woman’s honor consisted in guarding her sexual purity so as to assure legitimate offspring for the patriarchal household. Strict observance of these norms — public/private or honor/shame — meant that a respectable woman’s name would not be spoken in public lest she appear to be beyond male control. This may be one explanation for the scarcity of named women in ancient texts. While these norms applied mostly to elite women, freeborn women of lower status also aspired to elite values. In this system, freedwomen and slaves had significantly greater liberty to move about in public places. As slaves or former slaves, they had no honor to defend since they had been required to be sexually available to their masters.

What can be known about the social location and status of early Christian women? Wayne Meeks, Yale University professor emeritus of biblical studies, conducted a study of 80 Christian names in Paul’s undisputed letters and in the Acts of Apostles. He found that early Christian networks included heads of households, slaves, freeborn persons, slave owners, freed persons, artisans, small-scale traders, the poor and the financially well off. Using Meeks’ data, Ross Kraemer found very few names with paternal identification in a culture that normally identified free persons by the names of their fathers. Slaves and freed persons would not have been so identified because although they obviously had biological fathers, they did not have legal ones. Since very few named women in Paul’s social network were married, Kraemer theorizes that the absence of paternal identification may have been related to their status as slaves or freed persons.

Female heads of households such as Lydia at Philippi, Phoebe at Cenchreae, or Nympha at Laodicea could also have been widowed or divorced (before becoming Christian). Hence, in the earliest communities, many Christian women seem to have been relatively unaffected by cultural norms that encumbered their elite sisters. First century changes in marriage, childbearing and inheritance laws resulted in more women being permitted to independently manage their money. Both freeborn and freedwomen could and did own businesses and acquire significant wealth. Thus, it was not unusual for early Christian women such as Lydia (Acts 16) and Phoebe (Romans 16) to independently amass financial resources which they used to support the Christian mission. When a female head of household, (perhaps a wealthy widow or freedwoman) converted to Christianity, Christian evangelists such as Prisca or Paul gained access not only to her domestic household but also to her patronage network. This meant that her slaves, freed persons, children, relatives and patronal clients would often convert as well.

The early Jesus movement’s wholehearted embrace of an egalitarian social ethos, particularly with regard to the leadership of women, even slave women, was shocking to more than a few in the broader Greco-Roman culture. As Christianity gained traction among people of higher social standing, some biblical texts, such as 1 Timothy 2:11-13 forbade women to teach men and demanded that...
they keep silent at worship. The very existence of this command tells us that women must have been teaching men and speaking at Christian worship in the second century (when most exegetes believe the letter was written) or there would have been no need for a rebuke.

Today, a majority of scholars agree that the letters to Timothy and Titus were not written by Paul but by later followers. Far from silencing women, Paul’s genuine letters presume women will speak and prophesy in the assembly (1 Corinthians 11:5). While it is true that 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36 (“women should be silent in the churches”) mimics Timothy’s demand, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan cite strong textual and manuscript evidence that this segment was inserted by a later scribe, perhaps striving to make Paul’s genuine letter consistent with 1 Timothy 2:11-13. The male author of Timothy clearly expects women to conform to elite norms of public behavior by being silent and submissive to male authority especially in the context of worship. But, other contemporaneous biblical texts have a different take. For example, in John’s Gospel, the narrative about the Samaritan woman deliberately highlights and then discounts stereotypical female behaviors to which she does not conform. Yet, her nonconformity presents no obstacle to her acceptance and subsequent leadership in Jesus’s kinship network.

The seven undisputed letters of Paul are the earliest Christian manuscripts we have and constitute strong historical evidence for women’s evangelizing leadership in the earliest churches. Ten of the 28 individuals identified in Chapter 16 of Paul’s letter to the Romans are women. They are, respectively, Phoebe, Prisca, Mary, Junia, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus’s mother, Julia, and Nereus’s sister: Historian Peter Lampe deduces that women may have been more active than men in the first-century Roman church because Paul uses the verb “to work” (κοινωνέω) four times, always in relationship to a woman but never in relationship to a man. The four women so described are Mary, Persis, Tryphaena and Tryphosa.

According to Lampe, the Greek “to work” (κοινωνέω) is technical missionary language that Paul uses to describe his own ministry in Galatians 4:11 and 1 Corinthians 15:10. Four other influential women associated with Paul include Lydia (Acts 16:11-40), Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2-3), and Nymph (Colossians 4:14-16). We will now look more closely at what is known of several early women evangelists and heads of house churches. Owing to space limitations, only brief synopses are possible here.

Phoebe

Paul had never visited the church of Rome when he wrote the letter to the Romans. To prove his bona fides, he names all those in the Roman community (Romans 16) who know him and can testify to his reputation. He begins his letter:

I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a diakonoς of the church at Cenchreae that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the holy ones, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a benefactor to many and to me as well. (Romans 16:1-2, NABRE)

Biblical experts suggest that as a diakonoς, Phoebe was her community’s official envoy. As such she would not only have carried Paul’s letter to Rome, but in this predominantly aural culture, she would have performed or proclaimed it to the community gathered there. Phoebe’s title, diakonoς, is commonly mistranslated as “deaconess,” despite the masculine ending in Greek. While the exact meaning of diakonoς in the first-century church is unclear; it is significant that the title is the same one Paul uses for his own ministry (1 Corinthians 3:5; 2 Corinthians 6:4). Yet, Phoebe’s other title is probably even more important. She is called a benefactor (prostatis) to Paul “and many others.” Phoebe was an independent woman of wealth who, like Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna before her, financially supported the missionary outreach of the early church. She is one of many female patrons whose support and leadership permitted Christianity to spread rapidly in the Hellenist world.

Prisca

Prisca was a financially independent tentmaker who, with her husband Aquila, was deeply involved in the first-century expansion of the Jesus movement. The couple founded and directed house-church communities in three of the most important centers of early Christianity: Corinth, Ephesus and Rome. In Romans 16:3–5, Paul writes:

Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house.

All told, Prisca and Aquila are named six times in the Christian Scripture. Only twice is Aquila named first, (Acts 18:2) and (1 Corinthians 16:19). Since women are rarely named in ancient texts, let alone named before their husbands, Prisca is thought to have been the more prominent of the duo. Even though Acts portrays Paul as founding most of the early communities in Greece and Asia Minor, he did not arrive at Corinth until some nine years after Prisca and Aquila. By that time, the couple had already established a nascent Christian community and their tent-making business was sufficiently established that they could offer Paul both lodging and steady work. When the Christian community gathered to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, the female or male head of household was expected to host the meal, while another leader preached or taught from Scriptures. Prisca undoubtedly hosted or co-hosted Eucharistic meals when the church met at her house. There is no reason to believe that Prisca’s ministry as a married woman in the church differed in any substantive way from that of Paul’s other co-workers. We can presume that she evangelized both men and women and led the Eucharistic assembly when it met at her home.
Many wrongly believe that Paul actively suppressed women’s evangelizing initiative by forbidding them to teach men and to be submissively silent. “

There is good reason to celebrate Prisca as a great woman missionary and leader who worked in full partnership with both her husband and with Paul. With Paul, she was also an “apostle to the Gentiles” (Romans 11:13, NABRE).

Women of Philippi: Lydia, Euodia and Syntyche

The book of Acts identifies Lydia of Philippi as beginning the first house church in that city (Acts 16:6-40), and Paul’s letter to the Philippians suggests that a disagreement between two women, Euodia and Syntyche, is threatening the unity of the church there (Philippians 4:2-3).

Lydia was a dealer in purple cloth who lived in Philippi. Purple garments were highly valued in the ancient world since they were associated with aristocratic/elite families such as the imperial household and the Roman senate. Lydia was independently wealthy and the head of her own sizable household. We know this because she had no need to consult a husband or a father before inviting Paul and Silas to stay with her. One wonders what Lydia, a “worshiper of God,” (Acts 16:14) and her female companions were about when Paul finds them at the “place of prayer” (16:13) by the river. God-fearers were non-Jewish people who were interested in Judaism and hung around the local synagogue. But there was no synagogue at Philippi, or Paul and his companions would have gone there for Sabbath worship. What we do know is that Lydia “opened her heart” to the Gospel, was baptized herself, had her whole household baptized, and then invited Paul and his companions to stay at her home. Several weeks later before leaving town, Paul “encouraged the brothers and sisters” who are now meeting at her house (16:40). Lydia’s acceptance of Christ led many others to Christianity — and so the church at Philippi was born.

According to well-known Christian Scripture scholar, Sacred Heart Sr. Carolyn Osiek, Euodia and Syntyche were very likely among the episkopoi and diakonoi that Paul addresses in his letter to the Philippians. Paul uses these titles in no other greeting. While it is not clear exactly what they meant in the first-century church, they did signify official leadership at Philippi. Paul writes:

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion to help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. (Philippians 4:2-3)

By naming Euodia and Syntyche as co-workers who “struggled beside me in the work of the gospel” along with Clement, Paul telegraphs that the two were engaged in the work of evangelization. He is also asking the duo to “be of the same mind.” In three previous chapters, Paul had emphasized the need for unity. Now, he asks a third party to mediate a disagreement between these two influential leaders of the church. They are not minor players at Philippi since their differing opinions are affecting the unity of Christians at Philippi. It is likely that Paul also received personal patronage from the Philippian church, perhaps from Lydia, Euodia or Syntyche, because he writes:

You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. (Philippians 4:15-16)

Lectionary and pastoral issues

Even though women played a central role in the rapid spread of early Christianity, most Catholics are unaware of it. And no wonder, since Lectionary readings either rarely mention women’s leadership or in some instances, actually delete references to it. For example, Phoebe is summarily deleted from the Romans 16 reading for Saturday of the 31st Week in Ordinary Time, Year I (#490). Did male Lectionary compilers choose not to broadcast that she was a diakonos? The woman leaders in Acts, such as Lydia, Prisca and Tabitha, are featured only in the weekday readings of the Easter season. Euodia and Syntyche are never named on Sunday, and Nympha and her house church at Laodicea (Colossians 4:15) is never celebrated either.

Young women are leaving the church, perhaps in part because they don’t see themselves reflected in our Lectionary readings — let alone leading worship or preaching. One way to address this pressing pastoral challenge would be to sponsor a parish education program on women in early Christianity. Another is to select hymns that use inclusive language and celebrate biblical women and women in church history.

Preaching about Jesus and Paul’s inclusive practice would simultaneously educate about female disciples and leaders and correct the unfortunate impression that Paul was “anti-woman.” Paul was an apostle to the Gentiles — and so were Prisca, Phoebe, Lydia, Nympha, Euodia and Syntyche.

Editor’s notes: * Scripture quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version translation unless otherwise noted.

A list of further references for this article is available online for subscribers.

St. Joseph Sr. Christine Schenk’s recent book Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity (Fortress Press, 2017), details original research into iconic motifs of female authority found in early Christian art and archaeology. The writer of the award-winning column “Simply Spirit” for the National Catholic Reporter, Schenk has worked as a community organizer, a writer-researcher and a nurse midwife to low-income families. She is the founding director of FutureChurch, an international church reform organization.


Leaving our Narrow and Secure Spaces

The liturgical readings of September

By ROGER KARBN

I once had a dog named Boomer who was frightened by thunder and lightning. He never ran away during storms, but he tried to squeeze into the tightest space possible, usually between my bathtub and wash basin. He would stay squashed in there until the disturbance was over; then come out and look around as though nothing had happened.

Boomer wasn’t alone in his reaction to storms. I presume many of us act the same, especially when it comes to the storms our faith brings. We attempt to get as tightly secure as we possibly can. For some reason, we don’t like lots of “open space” when we’re stressed in those ways. We refuse to go out on a limb. The good old tried and true provide us more than enough security.

Such rote behavior can sometimes lead to problems. Cornelius Ryan, for instance, in his classic book on the D-Day landings, The Longest Day, narrates the story of an army chaplain who, on realizing he was parachuting into a river, instinctively prayed a perfect act of contrition. It was only after his men rescued him that he suddenly realized he had actually recited the customary prayer before meals instead of making an act of contrition!

In those spontaneous situations, we can presume God will simply sort our prayers and put them in the right box. It is different when we are dealing with other life and death issues … or is it?

On this year’s 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, the Torah’s Deuteronomic author provides us with the most basic biblical command: “Hear the statutes and decrees which I (Moses) am teaching you to observe, that you may live.” In other words, always do what is necessary to live. Technically, followers of Yahweh didn’t keep the Torah’s statutes and decrees because they wanted to get into heaven (our Deuteronomic author can’t even know that option existed), but because they wanted to live right here and now. They desired to have long, fulfilling lives, with lots of kids. Thankfully, Yahweh’s regulations showed them how to achieve this.

The author of Psalm 15 knows true success in this life revolves around one simple rule: Form the right relationships with Yahweh and those around us; realize “justice.” The psalmist knows this quest touches every aspect of our lives and provides a few classic examples, reaching all the way to how we are to lend money.

Centuries later, following Jesus’ example, James shares the specific direction in which he has personally gone to achieve life. He starts with the community’s most helpless — orphans and widows — and works out from there, faithfully echoing the Gospel Jesus’ warning not to get bogged down in minutiae. Especially when hard pressed, it is tempting to fall back on the “tradition of the elders,” on that old-time religion we learned as children. Of course, at that age, we rarely noticed how some people got hurt when we looked at our faith so narrowly. We rarely listened to the prophets in our midst or tried to surface peoples’ needs. It created less hassle and didn’t threaten eternal life when we simply followed some theologian’s tightly-knit external rules and regulations.

As we hear on the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, our sacred authors are convinced we only achieve a meaningful life for ourselves by first creating a fulfilling life for others. Though First-Isaiah is convinced, that above all, Yahweh’s followers should remove as much fear from others’ lives as possible, he also insists they should remove the daily anxieties of the blind, deaf, lame and mute; anything stopping them from living life to the fullest. We need only thumb through Psalm 146 to surface a partial list of those anxieties.

No wonder Jesus’ healing ministry hit a resonant chord with those he encountered. From earliest days, his disciples passed on stories of his cures. Today’s miracle must have been one of the first. Unlike later narratives, Jesus employs a third element — spit — to cure the deaf and mute man. The community eventually weeded out such elements, reducing the action to just Jesus and the cured person. They figured it was more important that he did it, not how he did it.

But we also appreciate James’ insight on a different level of need, the greatest we encounter: the need simply to be “someone.” Curing that need doesn’t demand miraculous powers. It only requires a community that values each person and where no one is more important than another. All are equal in the eyes of God and the community. If the risen Jesus has become one with us, why can’t we become one with those around us? The only problem is that to pull that off, we are forced to leave our narrow, secure space.

Carrol Stuhlmueller often reminded us that the best biblical definition of a disciple of Yahweh is contained in the first line of Deutero-Isaiah’s third song of the Suffering Servant, the initial reading of the year’s 24th Sunday...
Clean Hands and a Humble Heart

COMMENTARY | Mary McGlone

The Pharisees and scribes who gathered around Jesus in today’s Gospel reading were like fastidious amateurs who watch figure skating solely to note each flaw or ungainly gesture. In today’s Gospel, these experts in righteousness focused on the disciples’ disgraceful deficiency in handwashing practice. Of course, a critique of the disciple was an implicit disparagement of the teacher.

Jesus knew nothing about germ theory. Perceptive as he was, we can rest assured that he never saw a microorganism. When he lambasted the delegation from Jerusalem, Jesus remained focused on faith and integrity, not hygiene.

As so often happens, especially in matters of religion, the Pharisees’ problem sprang from good practices that went awry and took on a life of their own. According to Jewish tradition, God gave Moses the law as a guide to help humans fulfill their vocation as collaborators in the work of ongoing creation.

As we hear in today’s first reading, the law pointed out the path to life and outlined the plan for establishing a holy nation. Observance of God’s law would form the desert wanderers into a community that demonstrated the goodness of the God who called them into being. The law was essentially a blueprint through which the people of God would know how to further God’s plan for all people. By collaborating with that plan, they would enjoy communion with God.

That was the plan.

But, that plan fell under the influence of competitive, scrupulous, self-righteous, legalistic human beings. In other words, it got interpreted by the likes of you and me. With the best intentions in the world, wise people developed customs and practices designed to safeguard the law by interpreting how it should be put into practice in everyday situations. From the command to keep holy the Lord’s Day, there grew precise instructions about just which activities were and were not permissible on the day of rest, right down to the detail of when a candle could be lit. Exodus 30 and 40 taught that priests should perform ritual ablutions. (Exodus 30:18-21; 40:31-32.) Based on that, teachers developed practices to guarantee ritual purity for everyone — requirements that not everyone could fulfill due to their work circumstances, their health, or their gender. The law which was designed to be a path of holiness for all people became distorted. People who wielded the power of interpretation developed precepts that effectively segregated the community. Those who had the wealth and free time to act holy could cite religious reasons for avoiding the unclean and sinners whose touch or presence could contaminate them and their sanctuaries.

Jesus understood the law as a divine plan to bring humanity into union with God and with one another. Few situations moved him to anger like the hypocrisy of people who distorted the law’s intent. Obviously, the problem was not unique to first-century Pharisees. Every human society and every religious tradition
is prone to promote self-serving elitism and exclusion of those labeled as “the others.” In-group cohesion and self-ascribed status are the rewards for such discrimination.

Jesus responded to the purity police by citing the prophetic tradition. His quote from Isaiah was an indictment of their motives for scrupulous scrubbing. He might as well have said: “Is washing a humbling sign of your need to be cleansed from sin or a purity show? If you think clean fingernails are all you need to walk worthily in the presence of God, your hearts and your heads are in the wrong place!” In our liturgy, handwashing accompanies a prayer to be cleansed from sin.

This leads us to consider our own pious practices. How sincerely do we pray the Confiteor during our penitential act? Do we honestly admit our willful wrongdoing and avoidance of doing good? What if we took our penitential act as seriously as people in recovery take 12-Step meetings? At the beginning of each meeting, the participants introduce themselves as addicts. They go on to talk to one another about their failures and their attempts to avoid remaining trapped in destructive behavior. How would our faith communities change if we looked one another in the eye while saying, “I am a sinner; I need your support and your prayers!”?

Jesus critiqued his critics for keeping their hearts far from God. They lacked the integrity to admit their weakness, thereby blocking God’s saving grace from touching their hearts. A heart that protects itself from admitting weakness cannot know God because it has deified itself. We cannot mend our hearts solely by our own efforts. Fixing our hearts is a matter of will and grace. The grace is available through the law and the prophets, the Son and the communities led by his Spirit. Do we have faith that makes us willing to accept our need for help?

**DT 4:1-2, 6-8**

As this scene opens, Moses has just finished a long speech summarizing how God led the people of Israel to the brink of their entry into the Holy Land. Now, knowing that he cannot accompany them in the final steps of their journey, Moses reminds them that obedience to God’s law is what makes them who they are.

Moses begins this section of his discourse with a formal command that the people listen to what he is about to proclaim. That command was no toss-off phrase or warm-up to what he was about to say. Moses wanted his people to listen to his words as if their lives depended on it — because he believed that they did. Moses regarded the law of God as the very source of life and identity for his people. He wanted them to listen with their whole heart and soul.

Moses’ command that the people listen deeply reminds us of the call of Samuel. When Samuel said, “Speak, LORD, your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:9), he put himself in God’s hands. Listening meant that he was ready to do whatever God asked. People who listen in that way allow God’s word to permeate their being such that it becomes the central motivation of everything they do. Listening like this engenders obedience rooted in the heart. (The word obedience comes from the Latin root audire, to hear.)

Moses asks, “What nation is there that has gods so close … as the LORD, our God, is to us?” That question explains the heart of his concept of God’s law. For Moses, God’s law expresses God’s will in a way that’s almost incarnational. (See Deuteronomy by Patrick Miller) The law is God’s way of drawing close to the people, God’s way of sharing divine creativity and purpose with the chosen people. Because of that, following the law was actually a form of communion. Thus, Moses explains that if his people obey the law, their way of life will make them a sign to the nations, a witness to who God is.

Moses admonished his people to neither add nor subtract from the law. That can be confusing because law needs to be interpreted to apply it to particular circumstances. We could understand Moses’ injunction about changing nothing as a reminder that, although it is necessary, interpretation is always limited by its particular circumstances. Therefore, scribes, Pharisees, guardians of the tradition, theologians and hierarchs must keep their limitations in mind. Interpretation cannot supplant the law.

Understood this way, this reading complements today’s Gospel. When Jesus defends his disciples who seem to be infringing their religious tradition by their eating practices, he is pointing out the difference between God’s law and human interpretations. Just as he did in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:17), Jesus was harking back to the underlying meaning of Moses’ message. The law calls for obedience that springs from the heart rather than mechanical conformity to a code of conduct.

**PS 15:2-3, 3-4, 4-5**

Psalm 15 was written as a liturgical psalm, an entrance hymn to be sung by people coming into the temple. The first verse asks, “Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy mountain?” The rest of the psalm responds to the question. As this psalm is framed for today’s liturgy, the antiphon picks up on the heart of Moses’ message, promising that “Those who do justice will live in the presence of the Lord.”

In her book Sing a New Song: The Psalms in the Sunday Lectionary, Benedictine Sr. Irene Nowell explains that the Hebrew word sedeq, translated as justice, refers to the quality of relationships that a person maintains with others and God. Righteousness thus has far less to do with regulations than with interactions.

As the verses continue, the psalmist follows Moses’ lead and indicates that justice or righteousness is primarily a matter of a heart that cherishes the truth so much that truth guides everything the person says or does. It would be easy to believe that this psalm was in the back of Jesus’ mind as he replied to the pharisaic paragons of propriety who criticized his disciples for failing to wash their hands. This psalm explains justice in detail, including its demand to not harm or even reproach...
another, to lend freely and rebuff bribes. It says nothing about meticulous rules.

Remembering that the psalm originated as part of an entrance liturgy, we might use it as a guideline during the introductory rites of our liturgy. As the psalm reminds us that justice is a matter of putting a heart for others into action, the rest of the psalm could be used as a guideline for an examination of conscience or a penitential act.

The last line promises that those who act with justice will never be shaken. That is a common sentiment in the psalms and one that could also lead us to a new reflection on our traditional sign of peace. On this Sunday, when the Liturgy of the Word points so clearly to integrity of heart as the essence of our relationship with God and others, we might consider using the sign of peace to bless one another with a mandate to act with justice or with a prayer that each of us become more conscious of walking in the presence of the Lord.

JAS 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27

We could interpret the opening line of this selection from the Letter of James as a continuance of Moses’ teaching as well as an affirmation of the idea that human beings can discover God in the goodness of creation. Either way, the passage affirms that we find a reflection of God in everything that is good, be it in the nature and people around us or the work of grace within us.

Moses called on his people to listen with their hearts. James tells us to welcome the word planted in us with meekness or humility. The idea that the word is planted in us emphasizes that it is a grace, a gift of God and that, like a seed, it lives within us, involved in a process of growth moving toward fruition.

The word our Lectionary translates as “humbly” (praises) is somewhat uncommon word in Scripture, found in Matthew (5:4; 11:29; 21:5) and in some of the letters. According to William Barclay in The Letters of James and Peter, a better translation would be “meekly.” One who is meek in this scriptural sense is someone who is ready to learn, who does not consider her or himself self-sufficient. When we combine that idea with the call to “welcome” the word, we get a picture of James’ ideal disciples as people who look forward to the ongoing movements of grace in themselves. Unashamed of being on the way, they thrive on the hope of ongoing growth.

With verse 22, “be doers ... not hearers only,” we come to one of James’ most famous themes: the necessity of putting faith into action as the only way to live with integrity. There can hardly be a stronger warning than to say that not putting God’s word into action is delusional behavior. Someone who simply lies to others, who pretends to be who she knows she is not, is aware of the deceit and at least understands that she is a liar. But, people who delude themselves have fallen into a world of illusion. Like addicts in denial, they have slipped into a state of blindness from which it is extremely difficult to escape, and nigh unto impossible to overcome by oneself. When someone has slipped into being a hearer but not a doer, the prophetic community has the responsibility to speak like James and call them back to integrity. So too, prophetic members of the community have the responsibility to call the church as a whole to the care for the poor that demonstrates what James calls true religion.

MK 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

After our long sojourn through John 6, we return to the Gospel of Mark at what is nearly its crucial midpoint. Mark presents this interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees without specifying its precise time or place, thereby placing it in a category of widely applicable controversy and teaching. While Mark frames the incident as a conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes, what is really at stake is the question of the heart of religion in contrast to customs or traditions that may or may not function to bring people closer to God.

When the Pharisees speak of compulsory handwashings they are referring to the traditions that grew up around the Mosaic law. While not the law itself, these practices were intended to work like a “fence around the Torah;” they were behaviors which would facilitate full obedience to the law. In every society, from churches to families, once-beneficial practices easily become rigid customs that usurp the authority of law. Jesus disapproved of the Pharisees not for their hygienic practices, but because they had allowed their ritual behaviors, the fence around the Torah, to supersede the underlying intent of the law itself.

The value of ritual purity originated in respect for the Temple, but in some cases, it had become degraded into a practical elitism that marginalized others. Women and men came to be labeled as sinners or unclean on account of their professions or even conditions of gender. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for sanctifying legalisms that their lifestyle allowed them to maintain while they denigrated the people of God who could not afford the same privilege. In a statement that Paul would elaborate on in 1 Corinthians 11:17, Jesus quoted Isaiah and declared that the worship of those scribes and Pharisees was worthless because they had made doctrines of their preferences while ignoring the intent of God’s commandments.

This week’s readings call us to ever-deeper and broader integrity. Do we admit our own need for conversion and help to grow in grace? The readings warn us that our critiques of others put our own values and integrity on show and reveal whether our priorities come from a God-touched heart or a desire to look pious. When we discuss what “should” be done, our remembrance of Moses and Jesus demands that we question whether our interpretation of God’s will is life-giving to all people or self-serving.

James gives us the final test: Religion that is pure is this — care for the most needy and freedom from the false values of society.
In the musical, Fiddler on the Roof, Tevye the poor milkman resolutely sings of nonnegotiable tradition, while arguing with his heart about his love for his daughters. Without his traditions, he believes his life would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof. Set in the early 1900s in the midst of Russian oppression, Tevye finds meaning and identity in his tradition. Tradition tells him who he is and what God expects him to do. It provides an elusive sense of security by structuring his days and his way of life. His dreams and worldview are shaken to the core, as his daughters beg him to choose love for them over love for his tradition.

In the plot of today’s Gospel reading, a similar conflict is unfolding, and it could really tickle our consciences with some hard questions.

In stark contrast to the enthusiastic crowds who found great hope in Jesus’ message of love, the Pharisees and scribes were scandalized that Jesus’ disciples were not obeying the scrupulous traditions of the elders. “Tradition of elders” is a rabbinical term for the body of unwritten laws that the Pharisees considered as equally binding as the written Torah. Their strict application was often arbitrary and artificial. Unfortunately, all too often throughout church history there has been a human tendency to also taint the good news of the Gospel with pharisaical rules that only clutter up Christ’s message.

How about today? Are we better known for what we are against than what we stand for?

The official Jewish leaders criticized Jesus followers for how they washed their hands and dishes, while missing Jesus’ life-giving message. It can be a real temptation to be so consumed with keeping insignificant rules, that we lose sight of the real love of God. This attitude can try to legalistically control others with a particular amplified caricature of Christianity while missing the Spirit at work in them. When external changes in the church are met with strong resistance, and surface differences between Christian traditions continue to separate us, we have lost sight of what we are ultimately about. This is not the dream Jesus left us. How about you? Have you ever neglected the most important things in your life, because you paid too much attention to minor things?

Jesus chastised these officials from Jerusalem for paying lip service to religious practices, while their hearts were disconnected from God. With their empty grand gestures that sought to gain favor and impress, they were being religious without having a meaningful relationship with God. By looking at outward matters and not matters of the heart; replacing their relationship with God with rules; and putting laws before love, the Pharisees and scribes were failing to meet the challenges at the heart of God’s commands. Because their hearts did not beat for God, they neglected other people and a true love of God and justice. Likewise, it is important for us to ask ourselves if our actions authentically represent God’s divine life within us. Are we acting for our own glory, or are we sharing God’s loving presence from our hearts?

Like Tevye’s image of a fiddler on the rooftop, we can find ourselves trying to simply live our lives balancing precariously between tradition and love. It can be much easier to live by someone else’s set of rules, than to obey and follow God. Tevye argued frequently with this demanding, counter-intuitive and tenacious God, but love won.

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus gave us a new tradition that begins and ends with love. He asks us to let love transform our hearts and our souls so that we transform the world. In the tradition of love, are we willing to climb down from the rooftop and scratch out our simple, pleasant tune grounded in God?

CONNECTIONS | Dick Folger

A smoker for 35 years had successfully quit his bad habit. He had been smoke-free for 20 years; the damage done during his nicotine addiction had begun to reverse.

Recently, he was talking to a woman who was smoking and asked if he could “take a hit” from her cigarette. It was an evil urge that he allowed himself. No harm can come from one puff. The old pleasure rewarded his mind. That first puff opened the floodgates of the old addiction and within four weeks he was buying his own packs of cigarettes at about $9 per pack.

Like Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit, it is each person’s own responsibility to resist the powerful evils and the slick, Satanic salesman that lurks within us.
**LECTIONARIES**

**ROMAN**

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 35:4-7a
Psalm 146:6-7, 8-9, 10
James 2:1-5
Mark 7:31-37

**REVISED COMMON**

Proper 18

Isaiah 35:4-7a
Psalm 146
Mark 7:24-37

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## Opening Our Ears

**COMMENTARY | Mary McGlone**

The Letter of James stands out in Christian literature for its relentless insistence on justice in action as the sign of Christian faith. The vignette James gives us today may be the Christian Scripture’s first condemnation of “profiling.” James was writing to a community that apparently separated the ins from the outs by their dress, a detail even less revealing about a person than their ancestry, height, weight or color of skin. (Think about that in light of the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve tried to create fashion from fig leaves, they were inventing clothes to hide rather than express who they really were!)

James told his community a story of two visitors to a religious gathering. One is all but dripping with gold, while the other, like Pig Pen of the “Peanuts” cartoon, radiates what we might call a very earthy aura and aroma. The group’s reaction is just what would be expected — unless they purported to be Christians.

James reproaches his community for acting like the people in the story he made up. He accuses them of acting like bribeable judges by making distinctions among the members of their congregation. James calls them on the carpet for betraying God’s priorities. Even as James tells the community to make no distinctions, he points out that God has consistently chosen the poor to be rich in faith.

This Gospel teaching is especially challenging to economically comfortable communities of faith. Since 1968, the bishops of Latin America have been outspoken in their prophetic demands that the church recognize the unique role the poor play in Christianity. In 2007, the bishops published a document edited under the leadership of future Pope Francis that summarized their international meeting at Aparecida, Brazil. The bishops reminded the church that we meet Christ particularly in the poor and that the poor have a special claim on our commitment. They went on to say that the church’s faithfulness to Christ is at stake in our recognition of Christ in the poor. They summarize the prophetic position of the poor by saying, “Our very adherence to Jesus Christ ... makes us friends of the poor and unites us to their fate.” (Document of Aparecida #257).

With that in mind, let’s imagine James’ fictional community as they look over their two unexpected guests. What would they have said if one of their members jumped up, rushed past Goldfingers and the religious leaders to embrace the shabby guest cheerfully shouting, “Dusty! We have been waiting so long for you! You have so much to teach us! Come up to the ambo so you can get started.” Can’t you imagine a curmudgeon stage-whispering, “If she knew he was coming, why didn’t she get him a bath before he showed up?”

James’ insistence on the importance of the poor throws a unique light on the Gospel and the selection from Isaiah we hear today. Isaiah proclaims that God’s activity among us gives sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf and leads the lame to dance. (Note: There’s nothing about bathing or dressing well.) How likely is it that we who dress decently are the blind and deaf and lame to whom Isaiah refers?
We can appreciate today’s Gospel story — the miracle of healing the deaf man — as a marvel of Jesus’ power and leave it at that. On the other hand, we might ask where we fit in this story. Mark tells us that some unnamed people brought the deaf man to Jesus. Who in our society or world might be trying to lead us to a miracle of more acute hearing?

As we discern how to address societal needs, we can look to Pope Francis and church teaching through the ages. From the time that Jesus looked at his disciples and said, “Blessed are you poor” to the present time, Christianity has taught that the poor and those who work for justice represent the reign of God among us. The people moving the ecological efforts throughout the world are trying to open our ears to the cry of the earth. In our country, pro-life activists, the proponents of Black Lives Matter, the Me Too movement and the high school disarmament activists would say they are trying to bring our society to its senses. Perhaps, God is working through them somehow to move us to hear what our faith demands in today’s world.

**IS 35:4-7a**

This selection from Isaiah presents an unalloyed message of reassurance, and each part of it deserves meditation. The first encouragement we hear is, “Fear not!” a phrase that is repeated often in Scripture. Just for starters, we might look at how much television advertising plays on our fears: fear of illness and death; fear of financial problems; fear of being attacked in some way or robbed; fear of being unpopular; blighted or even incontinent. All of those can be summed up as fear of our own limitations or rejection by ourselves, others or God. Isaiah explains that God responds to all these fears just like parents who run when they hear their child crying. God says, “I am here.” Do we believe that is true? Is it enough for us?

As this passage continues, Isaiah’s message moves beyond that simple assurance and indicates how to recognize God’s saving activities. When we hear that God is coming with vindication and divine recompense, small hearts may be stirred to hope for vengeance, for a payback to all who cause them suffering. But that is not the sort of salvation God is proclaiming.

Isaiah tells us to seek divine recompense in the perfecting of creation, not punishment. This passage explains that salvation is happening when the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf are opened, when those whose knees are knocking stand up and leap like stags. Isaiah even goes so far as to say that the earth itself will come to new life as the deserts are watered and cooled.

But, we should be cautioned: This is salvation with a hook. Not only will God be here for us, but God’s way of being here calls us to become more like God. Salvation involves having our eyes and ears, and thus our hearts, opened to God’s plan for creation. God’s vindication on behalf of those who have suffered is to open the eyes of their oppressors, to lead them to conversion. In order to desire this sort of salvation, we have to cultivate a heart like the heart of God.

**PS 146:6-7, 8-9, 9-10**

The Lectionary tells us that instead of repeating “Praise the Lord,” we can use the word “Alleluia” as the refrain to our psalm. Alleluia is simply a word that means “praise the Lord.” This psalm opens the final section of the psalter in which each psalm begins with this same joyful cry of praise. In the light of this week’s Liturgy of the Word, we might try to be particularly mindful of God’s work among us as we pray this psalm. Then, we can pray with intentional thanksgiving for how God remains involved in human history.

Our first verse refers to God as the God of Jacob. That is not a title, but a reminder of God’s personal involvement with the people of Israel whose heirs we are. That idea is carried forth in the second part of that line: We say that God keeps faith forever because that has been our experience, not simply our dogma.

From there, our psalm moves into descriptions of God’s priorities: justice for the oppressed; food for the hungry; freedom for the captive; sight for the blind; hearing for the deaf; and protection for the stranger, widow and orphan. Then, just in case we still missed the message, the psalmist comes at it from another angle and warns us that God thwarts the way of the wicked. We could hardly have a clearer description of what the bishops of Latin America have identified as Christianity’s distinctive “preferential option for the poor” (Aparecida #257).

After hearing last week’s Gospel in which Jesus warned us about the hypocrisy of praise that comes from our lips but has no roots in our soul, we should consider this psalm with care before blithely singing it. As it refers to our reading from Isaiah and orients us to today’s Gospel, this psalm challenges us to ask if we truly want our eyes and ears to be opened to God’s truth. Can we respond to each of these verses with an “Alleluia” that comes from the depths of our soul and a commitment to further God’s plan in our time and place?

**JAS 2:1-5**

Scholars generally attribute the Letter of James to the James who was described as the brother of the Lord who, although he was not an apostle, was a leader of the early church in Jerusalem. Whether he was the author or it came from another, this letter is a treasure of early Christian wisdom and moral reasoning. Today’s selection begins to hone in on community relationships involving the wealthy and the poor.

To begin the discussion, James enjoins his community to “show no partiality” in their treatment of others. In saying that, James uses a word that is found only three other times in the Christian Scriptures (Romans 2:11, Ephesians 6:9, Colossians 3:25). The writers of these letters
all seem to be referring to Deuteronomy 10:17-18, which describes God as one who “has no favorites [and] accepts no bribes,” and at the same time “executes justice for the orphan and the widow and loves the resident alien.”

James offers delightfully vivid descriptions of the sort of behavior the community should avoid. Our translation doesn’t do justice to James’ portrayals of the two people who drop in on a Christian community. The literal description of the wealthy one is of a “golden fingered” man with “shining clothing.” But of the poor person, literally one who crouches or cringes like a beggar, the author says only that his clothing is filthy. Upon their arrival, the community blunders stupendously. Without blinking an eye, they sin in thought, word and deed by judging, speaking and showing each visitor to his right place, determined solely on the quality of his appearance.

Having presented this semi-fictional scenario, James moves from story mode to indictment. He equates the community with corrupt judges and accuses them: “Have you not made distinctions among yourselves?”

For James, an attitude of impartiality is a requirement for Christians, an essential characteristic of people who “adhere to the faith” in Jesus Christ. He reminds them that God’s impartiality actually bends toward the poor, giving them the grace of being rich in faith.

At the very least, this selection from James reminds us that faith in Jesus calls us to live by standards that are rarely appreciated by the culture around us. James would have us view ostentatious wealth with evangelical suspicion and approach the simple and impoverished members of the community with the reverence and attention we give our greatest teachers.

**MK 7:31-37**

As this Gospel scene opens, Jesus has returned to the area where he had healed a man possessed by a “legion” of demons only to have those demons escape to occupy nearby pigs, sending the whole herd hurtling over a cliff (Mark 5:17). Now, the people who then begged Jesus to leave their territory bring him a man who is deaf and beg Jesus to heal him.

Mark tells us that Jesus took the deaf man aside, away from the crowd. The word for taking him aside (apo-lambano) is usually translated as “receive” rather than “take,” giving us the impression that by going apart, Jesus was receiving the man into his private company for an encounter more personal than what can happen in the midst of a crowd. Jesus then performed the healing by putting his fingers in the man’s ears and placing his own spittle on his tongue.

Those healing gestures were typical in Jesus’ cultural milieu. Nevertheless, the willingness to touch an infirm person was a particular sign of solidarity and, even though some people in Jesus’ day considered spittle as a healing agent, sharing his saliva with the man was a gesture of special intimacy. After performing those gestures, Jesus assumed a posture of prayer. He then spoke as God had spoken at the creation; just as light appeared at God’s command, when Jesus said “Ephphatha!” the man’s ears were opened and he could speak clearly.

The healing so astounded the crowds that they could not contain their desire to spread the word about it. Gentile or Jew, we do not know, but the popular verdict was, “He has done all things well. He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.” (Obviously, the healing was much more acceptable behavior than launching two thousand pigs into the abyss!) Jesus’ healing ministry always went beyond a simple cure. Everyone freed from an infirmity remains subject to other physical problems and ultimately to death. Jesus’ healings did not eliminate human mortality, but they were oriented to the whole person, not just a health condition. Opening the ears of the deaf brought about a transformation on both the human and the theological level. On the human level, dialog, hearing and speaking, characterize and differentiate people from the animals and other parts of creation. When we listen, we freely allow something of the very being of another to enter into us. Speech is one of our primary ways of communicating with others. Theologically, we understand God’s communication with human beings as word and with the Word made Flesh. Opening the deaf man’s ears enriched his ability to relate to others. On the theological level, the healing was symbolic of allowing the word of God to communicate with his heart.

Mark is careful to let us know that the man’s speech became clear only after his ears were opened. On both the natural and the theological levels, hearing must precede speech. Mark drives home that idea in what is usually called the messianic secret. Jesus ordered the witnesses not to tell anyone, but “the more he ordered them not to, the more they proclaimed it.” In explaining this, Mark is highlighting two dimensions of the same reality. On a superficial level, the people who witnessed the healing refused to hear/obey Jesus’ admonition to keep silent: They felt qualified to speak about him even though he asked them not to do so. On a more profound level, Jesus’ reason for the prohibition was that they hadn’t truly heard or understood his message. Like the deaf man with a speech impediment, their proclamation could not be clear because their understanding remained shallow. Jesus repeated this prohibition to the disciples at the Transfiguration (Mark 9:9) and at other moments for the very same reason: Those who were amazed at him didn’t yet really understand who he was. (Remember that in Mark 1:24, a demon was the first to proclaim that Jesus was the Holy One of God.)

Taken together, this week’s readings remind us of how much we have to learn and how cautious we should be in making judgments. The first reading and the Gospel promise that God will open our ears if we ask. The second reading advises us that God’s word will often come from what we consider the least likely sources. In some ways, these readings are a prelude to what will come next week. For now, we need to remember that salvation comes with a hook: The more we want from God, the more like God we are called to become.
HOMILY | Tom Turner

My younger sister tells this story about going to Sunday Mass. It happened years ago while she was living in a Minneapolis suburb. As she walked toward the front door of the church, she spotted a shabbily dressed man asking people for money as they entered church. She wasn’t sure what to do if he approached her, so she decided to avoid eye contact and walked quickly into church.

Right before Mass began, she turned around, looked back and saw that the panhandler had now come inside the church and was looking for a place to sit. Like a passenger on a plane with an empty seat next to her, she was hoping he wouldn’t take a seat by her. To her relief, the man sat somewhere else. She noticed others looking at him with leery eyes.

During the singing of the “Alleluia” before the Gospel, she noticed the panhandler walking down the main aisle toward the altar. When the singing stopped, the shabbily dressed man walked up to the pulpit and read the Gospel. He then returned to his pew and sat down.

As she and the rest of the congregation soon learned: They had been set up. The shabbily dressed man was in cahoots with the pastor. He was a plant. The pastor came to the pulpit and said, “The message of today’s readings is, ‘It is the poor who announce the good news.’”

In the second reading, James writes about how we treat well-dressed people with deference and people who are in “shabby clothes” with condescension. James then says, “Did not God choose those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith?”

For the past 25 years, I have worked at a social service agency and found this insight by James to be accurate. I am frequently impressed by the faith of those who are poor.

How then do we become “rich in faith?” I think the poor can show us the way. When you get to a point in life where you depend upon the kindness of strangers for your next meal, you are a short step away from depending upon the kindness of God.

When one depends on the kindness of God just to make it through the day, that person is “rich in faith.” It explains why the most common answer I hear when asking a poor person, “How are you?” is “Blessed.” In the Gospels, Jesus says both the “poor” and the “poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3) are blessed. So, if we are not materially poor, we still have a shot at being blessed if we are poor in spirit.

What does “poor in spirit” look like? Imagine the guy that James describes: “a poor person in shabby clothes.” It’s pretty easy to do because most of us see this person every day on a street corner, holding a cardboard sign that says, “Anything helps.” This is the person that James holds up as the role model of being “rich in faith.” I don’t think James means that we are all to become materially poor. Rather he means that our souls should look like that person. On our inside, we should all be holding signs pointed at God that say, “Anything helps.”

There have probably been stressful times in your life when you metaphorically held that sign up to God. During that time, you and the panhandler on the street corner had much in common. That desperate surrender to God is what poverty of spirit feels like. The good news, Isaiah says, is that when we reach that point, “with divine recompense God comes to save you.”

And that is why having a shabbily dressed person read the Gospel at a Sunday Mass makes all the sense in the world.

INCLUDING YOUTH | Jim Auer

After hearing the epistle from James, consider those with whom you prefer to spend time — are they the popular, athletic, successful and beautiful? Or the ordinary, the poor, the less accomplished? Whom do you or would you invite to a party? If it were possible to invite a refugee from the Middle East, a peer from a poorer neighborhood or a DACA student ... would you? (Only 100 percent honest answers accepted.)

“He put his fingers into the man’s ears and, spitting, touched his tongue.” Caring for the afflicted can be physically messy, even unpleasant. Do you offer to care only for freshly showered, physically attractive people dressed in prom-worthy clothing?

CONNECTIONS | Dick Folger

While Pope Francis visited a parish in Rome, a young boy named Emanuele asked if his late father, an atheist, was in heaven. When he began to cry, the pope invited the boy to whisper into the pope’s ear. With permission, Francis shared their conversation: “A boy that inherited the strength of his father also had the courage to cry in front of all of us. If this man was able to create children like this, it’s true that he is a good man ... That man did not have the gift of faith. He wasn’t a believer, but he had his children baptized. He had a good heart.” The pope asked the group if they thought God would abandon a good man. The children of the parish shouted “No.” Then the pope said: “There, Emanuele, that is the answer.”
LECTIONARIES

ROMAN
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Isaiah 50:5-9a
Psalm 114:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9
James 2:14-18
Mark 8:27-35

REVISED COMMON
Proper 19
Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 116:1-9
James 3:1-12
Mark 8:27-38

Who Do You Say that I Am?

COMMENTARY | Mary McGlone

“Who do you say that I am?” That’s the final, blunt question that Jesus puts to the disciples in today’s Gospel. No more hiding behind popular speculation; they had to answer for themselves. Worst of all, their answer could not be just an opinion. What they said now would profess their level of commitment. Their answer would explain just how far they would be willing to go with him.

How do we explain to people who Jesus is? We might tell children, “Jesus is the Son of God.” That is probably the best start we can make, but it is rather incomplete. It is akin to explaining who a relative is by saying, “Cousin Margaret is the daughter of Uncle Martin.” But so what? What is special about Uncle Martin or his daughter? The lights go on when someone explains that Uncle Martin sold the farm so he could send Margaret from Ireland to work and earn enough to save the rest of us from famine.

Now suppose you hear that Uncle Martin inherited a couple more farms and wants to adopt you. That sounds promising. You would be wise to consider the idea that he might be willing to sell them and then send you to work for the rest of the family. How might that change the situation?

Why would you want to join Uncle Martin’s nuclear family? Marty has become known for a particular, if not peculiar, sort of behavior. He is ready to adopt anybody who is willing to participate fully in family life, but his value system is a real spoiler for anyone who has individual get-rich plans. According to Martin, wealth is fine, but he wants it for everybody, not just himself or even just his family. Being related to him has consequences.

Uncle Martin’s story reflects today’s Gospel challenge. Jesus asked his disciples who they believed him to be. “The Messiah,” said Peter. But what did that imply? Peter and the rest were faithful to Jesus according to their understanding of the Messiah. They were like someone that our landlord uncle considered Martin’s plans for sharing the wealth. When Jesus explained the way he understood being Messiah, Peter was quick to try to straighten him out. Like the would-be nephew who tells Uncle Martin, “You’re a wealthy landowner! If you sell this farm, you’ll be nobody. (And me, too!” Peter knows what that implies?

Jesus answered Peter with the same words he used to call the sons of Zebedee: “Follow me” (translated now as, “Get behind me”). The implication was clear: If Peter and the rest believed that Jesus was the Messiah, then they had to trust Jesus to know how a Messiah should act. Jesus called disciples to introduce them to his way of living and to advance the venture he called the reign of God. Their story demonstrates that it takes a long time to grow into sharing Jesus’ priorities, but more important than their shortcomings is the fact that they stayed with him — and he with them.

Staying with Jesus, in spite of his warning that he and they would suffer, was what constituted that group as disciples. Having heard about the cost, they continued to listen to him.
What about today? How do we answer the question of who Jesus is? We can answer with our creed, but it is a pretty intellectual statement. The closest we get to an answer are statements: “For us ... and for our salvation, he came down from heaven.... For our sake he was crucified.”

If we want to answer the question with heart and soul as well as mind, we need to encounter Christ, walk with him and talk with him. In his latest apostolic exhortation, Pope Francis asks, “Are there moments when you place yourself quietly in the Lord’s presence, when you calmly spend time with him, when you bask in his gaze? Do you let his fire inflame your heart?” (Gaudete et Exultate #151).

As Catholics, our poor tradition of reading Scripture has left many unaware that the church “has always venerated the Scriptures as she venerates the Lord’s Body” (Catechism of the Catholic Church #103). In light of that, Francis reminds us that we can encounter Christ through prayerful reading of the Bible in which we allow God’s word “to enlighten and renew us” (Evangelii Gaudium #152-153).

When we spend time encountering Christ and allow him to enlighten and renew us, our way of living will be our final answer to who we say he is.

**IS 50:5-9a**

This selection from Isaiah offers one of Scripture’s best antidotes to what Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace” (See The Cost of Discipleship, Chapter 1). Bonhoeffer understood cheap grace as a practice of Christianity that desires religion’s benefits without the cross. He called it the grace we bestow on ourselves in a religion that makes no demands and changes nothing, all the while expecting a heavenly reward simply for calling oneself a Christian. It is religion that sees baptism as an insurance policy rather than a job description.

Isaiah’s Songs of the Suffering Servant describe God’s faithful in a way that undercuts any self-interested motivation for religion. The servant begins saying that God has opened his ear and that he has submitted willingly to God’s word. One would expect that such obedience would bring blessing, and according to this servant it has, but not in the conventional sense of the word.

Unlike Jeremiah who railed about his mistreatment or Job who cursed the day he was born (Jeremiah 12; Job 3), the servant takes his suffering in stride, proclaiming “The Lord God is my help.” He so trusts in God that public opinion counts for nothing.

The early Christians used this and the other Servant Songs as the keys to interpreting Jesus and his mission from within their Jewish tradition. Popular messianic dreams longed for a victorious warrior/king. The Suffering Servant reveals what naked faith looks like. This is faith without any visible reward. Bonhoeffer might be explaining the servant’s paradoxical faith when he says, “If you don’t believe, take the first step all the same. ... Then you will find yourself in the situation where faith ... exists in the true sense of the word” (The Cost of Discipleship).

**PS 114:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9**

This psalm gives thanks for the deliverance that Isaiah’s Suffering Servant had awaited in hope. Our refrain, “I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living,” echoes the servant’s faith. In the Hebrew mindset, to walk in God’s presence implied a wholehearted orientation of one’s life to God.

Whereas the servant concentrated on fulfilling God’s command and suffering in hope, this psalmist rejoices because of God’s deliverance. The central collective experience behind the psalm was God’s saving help through the events of the Exodus, nevertheless, anyone who has known God’s help in a time of trauma can resonate with the gratitude the psalmist expresses.

**JAS 2:14-18**

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation. (Justice in the World)

This quote comes from “Justice in the World,” the document issued in 1971 by the second Synod of Bishops following the Second Vatican Council. Originally, some bishops thought that statements like this were misleading, even potentially destructive of the church itself.

According to Jesuit Fr. Bill Ryan — one of the theological experts who attended the synod — some bishops contended that Christ’s body, the church, “is a perfect society and so cannot be essentially linked to earthly justice, which is never perfect.” They should try telling that to the James who penned today’s second reading!

In the end, the statement stood and 94 percent of the synod’s bishops approved the final document. But both in the preparation and in the aftermath, their statement that work for justice is essential to evangelization made waves in much the same way that the Letter of James probably did nearly 2,000 years earlier:

Today’s selection points out that there is no evading Christianity’s practical commitment to the poor. James asks if faith without works has saving value. He answers that it is just as valuable, as powerful and salvific as the words of someone who pronounces a beautiful blessing over a starving family but does nothing to find them food. Such a blessing is a mockery, the faith it claims is dead.

James meant to shock his community when he said, “Faith ... if it does not have works, is dead.” He was writing to people who found death repulsive and ritually contaminating. He might as well have said such faith was putrid, a repulsive masquerade of what it claimed to be.
Today the world has focused on sexual abuse scandals as putrefying church life. With all the deceit, cover-up and lack of concern for the welfare of victims, there is good reason for that. But one kind of clerical sin cannot be allowed to divert our attention from the demands faith makes on all of us. Today’s reading from James tells us that our liturgy is a mockery and our faith putrid if they don’t lead to action for justice.

We can rightly protest that global awareness makes nearly overwhelming demands on us. It is one thing to respond to the person within our reach, but what about the 23,800 that the U.N. says are forced to flee their homes each day; the chronically undernourished in sub-Saharan Africa, or millions of undocumented children, women and men living in fear of deportation in the United States?

The fact that we can’t do everything is no pretext for doing nothing. At the very least, instead of echoing the hypocritical blessing, “Go in peace...eat well,” we must skewer up the courage to pray, “Lord, show us how we who have so much can share and alleviate your hunger, your homelessness, your chronic insecurity.”

The worst thing about this sort of prayer is that God will answer it.

**MK 8:27-35**

According to many scholars, this is the turning point in Mark’s Gospel. Jesus had been teaching in Galilee, now he turns toward Jerusalem and begins to focus on teaching his closest disciples about what it means for him to be the Christ, God’s anointed one.

Last Sunday, we considered the need to have our ears opened in order to hear Christ’s message. This Sunday, the scene opens with Jesus asking the disciples what they have heard about him. They respond with people’s opinions.

Some say he’s John the Baptist. Both John and Jesus were popular preachers who gathered followers and were a threat to powerful civil and religious leaders. Yet, their messages were quite distinct. As Jesus admitted, John was known for fasting while he was famous for feasting. Herod’s fear that Jesus was John returned from the dead shows how much power John had over the popular imagination.

Elijah, the other popular guess, was the prophet who disappeared in a fiery chariot and was expected to return at the end of time (2 Kings 2:1-12). People who identified Jesus with Elijah were putting him in the category of the prophets. They were guessing and maybe even hoping that he might be the one to usher in the end of the world.

Thinking of Jesus as Elijah indicated that they thought he was sent by God and faithful to the tradition of Israel.

It seems that there was popular talk and plenty of confusion about Jesus. The disciples’ answer about what people said was the same answer Herod came up with after he had John put to death (Mark 6:14-16). People thought something unusual was happening among them and their varied explanations showed that they were paying attention and wondering, even hoping that something might come of it all. At the same time, their answers remained speculative. Nobody who said those things had to make any commitment; they could remain in the safe agnostic territory of “perhaps” and “we’ll see.”

At this point in Jesus’ mission, idle speculation was worthless. After letting them talk about what they had heard, Jesus terminated the opinion poll and put them on the spot: “But you! You! Who do you say that I am?” That was the question of their lives. Why were they on the road with him? What were they seeking? How far were they willing to go?

Peter’s answer was complete and Jesus would immediately expose it as completely mistaken. Like a deaf man whose speech was muddled, Peter proclaimed, “You are the Christ.” In reply, Jesus warned him not to talk about that to anyone.

Mark then says, “He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer.” That was hardly what the crowds and his disciples were expecting from a messiah. It was a contradiction in terms. Jesus might as well have offered them dry water or cooling fires. How could the hero-savior, the king of heaven, the ruler of the earth, suffer and die?

Rise after three days? Everyone knew that “three days” was code for “in God’s good time.” That meant we have no clue when it will happen, but we continue to hope.

This was a story none of them would have ever written, a play they might not have tried out for had they understood the plot. Unable to believe that Jesus meant what he was saying, Peter pulled him aside to try to talk some sense into him.

Jesus, standing with Peter and looking at the disciples, replied: “Tempter! I am the leader here. Follow me!” He summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” Jesus then addressed everyone around and put a clear choice before them. In effect he told them: “Either you try to save yourselves and end up with nothing but yourselves, or you give all that you are to this Gospel message and you will learn what salvation means.”

John’s parallel to this moment of decision comes when Jesus invites his followers to partake in his body and blood, thereby inviting them to participate in his total self-giving. In John’s Gospel, Peter responds by saying, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life” (6:68). In Mark, Peter makes no reply; he and the others simply continue to walk with Jesus.

At this stage of the Gospel, Peter and the disciples are like the deaf man whose ears Jesus opened. Peter, speaking and acting on behalf of the disciples, communicated two important things. First, he professed faith in Jesus. Then, when Jesus told him his faith was distorted, he remained to learn more.

The journey to Jerusalem would be long and hard, and even when they reached the climax of the cross, the disciples hadn’t comprehended Jesus’ message. But they had the love and faithfulness to remain on the road with him, and that was all that was necessary.
HOMILY | Angela Butel

A common internet joke format begins, “There are two kinds of people,” and then illustrates the two categories into which the world is divided. These jokes are funny because they are relatable; for instance, two images of an email app, one with no notifications and one with 3,588 unread messages.

Today’s readings play with this idea that there are two kinds of people in more serious but equally relatable ways.

The second reading sets a scene many of us probably experience: passing by someone without adequate food or clothing. The writer asks, “If ... one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,’ but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it?” (James 2:16).

How often have we passed by someone with a sign, or asking for money at an intersection, and not even wished them well but simply avoided eye contact? Because we’re in a rush, because we feel uncomfortable, or because we’re not sure how to help, we feel disconnected from this other person, like we are on opposite sides of some dividing line.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus reveals to his disciples what must happen to him: He must “be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days” (Mark 8:31). Jesus’ disciples are disturbed by this revelation because they think of Jesus as one of the “good guys.” They’ve just described him in the same category as John the Baptist, Elijah and the prophets! He can’t possibly be one of those people who would be outcast and executed as a criminal.

But Jesus rejects his disciples’ insistences that there are two kinds of people. That is how humans think, he says; for God, we are all one. The person with two coats and the person with none; the person with more than enough food and the person going hungry. We are all one, all on the same team, working toward the same goal: a more just, peaceful world.

Just as he does throughout the Gospels — dining with tax collectors, conversing with Samaritans, healing lepers — Jesus in the Gospel today aligns himself with the people society has rejected. He is not concerned with being in the “right” half of the two kinds of people. His whole ministry makes us see the falsehood of that division and gives us the blueprint for healing it.

Acting on this blueprint is essential to our discipleship; as the second reading today reminds us, without action our faith means little. Looking for situations in which we feel we are on one side of a divide and a fellow human being is on the other is a good way to identify the moments that require us to act.

The common scenario of meeting a stranger asking for help is just one of those moments. There are many opportunities for narrowing the divide we feel in that situation. We can begin by acknowledging the other person’s humanity: seeing them, saying hello, wishing them a good day. We might choose to share food or clothing with them if we have something to spare. We can give of our excess in more organized ways as well, donating items we no longer need to people who can use them or financially supporting local organizations that provide services. And, we can work to build a more supportive community by voting for people and policies that make that a priority as well as organizing with our neighbors to advocate for justice for all.

As you go forth into the world today, consider: What are other ways you are confronted with the idea that “there are two kinds of people?” What can you do to reduce that division?

INCLUDING YOUTH | Jim Auer

Let’s say you understand algebra or calculus really well. Sitting on a campus bench, stressed, perhaps crying, is a classmate who is lost in that class. Exams are imminent. Do you say, “Good luck on the exam! See you in class.” Would Jesus do that? No? Well, we follow Jesus, remember?

Jesus predicts that he will have to pay for being himself at the hands of the elders, chief priests and scribes. Who are those people today among young people? Often, it is the popular; the socially powerful. Whom do they persecute? Sometimes it is Christians who refuse to be unchristian.

CONNECTIONS | Dick Folger

The Roman city of Caesarea Philippi was as far north as Jesus ever got. From there, Jesus turned south toward his final destiny, Jerusalem. But, before leaving there, Jesus asked the question: “Who do people say that I am?”

It remains a question for all around the world. Catholics worshipping at the Greenland Thule Air Base, 800 miles from the North Pole, will answer that question. At the tip of South America, where Cape Horn points toward Antarctica, the question will be asked in the Patagonian city of Ushuaia, Tierra del Fuego. From Jakarta to Quito, from Africa to India, nearly 1.3-billion Catholics in the world will be answering with Peter: “You are the Christ.” What then, is your answer?
Most average people in the U.S. don’t think of themselves as having servants. That’s because it’s so easy to forget about the grocery store clerks and the janitors, not to mention the workers who harvest our strawberries and fill the potholes on our roads. We have lots of servants, but since we don’t usually hire them directly, we rarely take note of them the way the lords of Downton Abbey did of Mr. Carson, their butler. But from what we’ve heard for the past couple of weeks, Jesus thought a fair amount about servants and how he was called to be one.

In today’s Gospel story, Jesus made a point of walking the road with just his disciples so that he could have an intimate conversation with them. Knowing their expectations for greatness, he explained for a second time that he was going to be betrayed, killed and then rise to new life. His companions responded with blessed silence. No questions, no sympathy, no protest. Perhaps, they were just shaking their heads in hopes that he’d come to his senses when they finally sat down in the shade. Once he was out of hearing distance, they got into a lively discussion of their own.

The scene when they arrived at their destination must have been interesting. When Jesus asked what they had been arguing about along the way, they again took refuge in silence. So once more, Jesus tried to explain himself.

When he had told them that he would be taken by force but would not respond in kind, they were reduced to silence. He tried to explain his reasoning. Everything he did was part of his project of making God’s kingdom of justice, peace and well-being present among them. None of it was for his own glory, but rather for the good of everyone concerned. (That is one reason for telling them not to talk about it.) If he had wanted fame and fortune, wouldn’t he have been better off catering to the powerful? Instead, the powerful were precisely the ones who were threatened by him and his attention to the outcasts and unnoticed.

Jesus was telling the disciples: “If you want to be great, look to God who has handed creation over to mere human beings. Think about it! Who is most important in society? Do emperors, generals and religious leaders surpass the importance of mothers? Whose role is truly indispensable — not to mention life-giving?”

Jesus’ disciples loved him, but they didn’t understand him. His way of thinking was just too different. So, when words didn’t suffice, he picked up a child to show his argumentative disciples what it looks like to be in first place in the reign of God.

What was he trying to teach them as he put his arms around the child? Perhaps that like the child, they had been chosen not for their importance or even their potential, but because they were loved. Their mission was not to perform mighty works, but to receive the little ones, the needy, the forgotten and the rejected. Their mission was to share the love they had been given so freely. They were called to the humble, humbling service of embracing the little people just as Jesus did.
When Jesus picked up the child, he was performing a living parable, teaching that loving someone is the greatest service you can do them; everything else flows from that and nothing else is very valuable without it. Loving is also the greatest service we can do for the entire world because the more people are loved, the less they need to compete and use violence to make their mark.

Jesus’ faith in the mission God gave him was what made him so different from the rest. It made him both incredibly attractive and impossible to understand in a theoretical way. Jesus knew in his bones that love is more powerful than violence. Thus, no matter how horrific the violence that would be done to him, he knew it would not overcome him. That’s why Jesus never spoke of the passion without the resurrection: They were one and interwoven. The Resurrection was the final defeat of oppression and violence. It was the victory of the little ones, the victory of the servant.

To get to the resurrection, Jesus had to pass through the shoals of death. He had to trust love to carry him all the way through. It was Jesus’ faith and vulnerability that allowed God to raise him. No theory is sufficient. But the word of the Lord is that no practice will fail.

WIS 2:12, 17-20

The sage writing the Book of Wisdom is preaching to the choir in today’s reading. It is a discourse both we and the choir probably need to hear. Earlier in this chapter, the sage described the materialist philosophy of the wicked. According to the author, the wicked refuse to believe in anything outside of their direct experience. They say: “Brief and troubled is our lifetime; there is not remedy for our dying” (Wisdom 2:1). That outlook leads to a sense of meaninglessness: “When this is quenched, our body will be ashes and our spirit ... poured abroad like empty air” (2:3). Then, because they see no meaning beyond the moment, they conclude: “Let us enjoy the good things that are here. ... and let no springtime blossom pass us by” (2:6–7).

Poetic and sophisticated as they presume to be, the very existence of the righteous questions them beyond their power to ignore. The idea that anyone could be content with a life not based on immediate gratification becomes an affront to them. They can’t resist the challenge to prove themselves right by proving believers wrong.

Unfortunately, the most frustrating opponent a high competitor can go up against is someone who doesn’t care about winning. The wicked can make the righteous miserable, but that doesn’t change their minds. The more miserable they make the innocent, the deeper their own wound from not winning. They can get caught in a frenzy of torture, dehumanizing themselves while still unable to undermine the dignity of their victims.

The problem is that the wicked are trying to win a game the righteous won’t play. As James Reese states in his commentary The Book of Wisdom, “The ungodly group presumes that the upright must fear death just as they do.” But history has shown repeatedly that when a person doesn’t fear death, martyrdom offers no threat. The wicked also assume that if God is on the side of the righteous and they victimize them with violent tactics, God will be forced to use the same sort of tactics to defend the innocent. Again, they have misjudged their opponent.

The bitterest pill the unjust must swallow is that what frightens and controls them is impotent over the righteous. That is what the Salvadoran army and government learned when they threatened Blessed Oscar Romero and the people he led. Contrary to what bullies believe, persecution often strengthens resistance as it brings people to understand the truth that Paul expressed in 2 Corinthians: “I am content with weaknesses ... persecutions ... for the sake of Christ, for when I am weak, then I am strong” (12:10).

PS 54:3-4, 5, 6, 8

Today’s psalm refrain summarizes the message and hope of this week’s readings. The persecutors caricatured in the first reading are clueless about the faith this psalm celebrates. The opening line proclaims the mystery of God’s relationship with the chosen ones. When someone praying this psalm calls upon the name of God, she is making a confident proclamation about the God who saves and at the same time, she is imploring God to hear her prayer.

The rest of the psalm could be placed in parallel columns with Jesus’ teaching about his upcoming suffering and glory. The second pair of verses explain the impotence of the haughty: Do what they may, their efforts will fail because they have nothing to do with God. The final part of the psalm mirrors Jesus’ announcement that he would rise. No matter what might rage against him, God will sustain his life.

JAS 3:16—4:3

At this point in his epistle, James leaves the arena of social justice to talk about relationship in the community. Although those too have implications for justice, James now addresses the topic differently.

It seems that every human community is prone to the problems James mentions. It all starts when we play a measuring game and evaluate our own worth in the light of another’s gifts.

That is a poor idea from the start because we are judging another from our vantage point, a perch which rarely offers insight into another. We may see their success, but not the effort it took to get there or the insecurity they may feel. Perhaps the only people we can evaluate with any degree of correctness are those who are humble enough to admit their own failures, their struggles and the awe they feel at having received God’s grace. It is rare that such people incite great envy or jealousy.

James tells us that conflictual behavior springs from ignoring wisdom “from above.” Wisdom from above is a gift of God. The chief characteristic of the person who possesses it is an awareness of that fact. The qualities
James mentions flow naturally from a person’s awareness of the gift of grace.

James says that wisdom from above is pure. By that he means that it includes singleness of heart, purity of intention. The wise person is peaceable and considerate, meaning that she neither flaunts nor hoards what she has. She notices others and responds to them with an awareness of how they can be good for one another. When James says that someone with wisdom from above is compliant, it means that he can listen to another humbly and respectfully enough to allow his own opinion to change in light of what the other says.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” James implies that the inverse is just as true; wisdom from above assures a person that she has been shown mercy and it disposes her to practice it as well.

James criticizes his community because they have allowed conflict to characterize their communal life. He attributes their problems to their “passions,” habits of prioritizing their own pleasure or enjoyment. Their self-centered attitudes have even made their prayer impotent because in asking for their own pleasures, they are seeking something God does not give.

**MK 9:30-37**

According to Mark’s way of relating the story, Jesus was rather casual when he first told the disciples that he was headed for suffering, death and new life. As we heard in last week’s Gospel, he initiated the conversation with the question of who others thought he was and then went on to explain that his vocation was to be God’s suffering servant, not a warrior king. This week, our Gospel presents his second attempt to help the disciples understand what he was really all about.

Mark tells us that Jesus was traveling in secret, carving out essential time with his disciples, trying to help them comprehend how he understood his vocation. Now, he addresses his theme head-on and tells them that the Son of Man will be handed over, be killed, and will rise after three days. Instead of responding with sorrow or even protest, the disciples said nothing.

Mark explains their silence saying, “They were afraid to question him.” That phrase reflects the original end of Mark’s Gospel (16:8) when the women who received the message of Jesus’ resurrection said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.

Of what were they afraid? Earlier in the Gospel, people responded with fear when Jesus calmed the storm (4:41); when they saw the exorcism of the man who lived among the tombs (5:15); when the woman who was healed by touching his garment came before him (5:33); and when Jesus walked on the water (6:50). In each of those instances, it was Jesus’ awesome power that led them to fear. Now it seems that his vulnerability frightened them. In either case, they responded with fear to what they couldn’t understand.

When Jesus had told them not to speak, the word of his accomplishments spread quickly. When he talked to them about what was coming or asked them what they had been arguing about, they remained silent. Fear is embarrassing to admit and confession, even though it is more honest, can be much harder than bragging.

The first message Jesus preached in Mark’s Gospel was, “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.” His call to repentance (*metanoia*) invited them to take on an entirely new mindset, to begin to live as participants in God’s reign over creation. Everything that Jesus said and did from that moment on was a revelation of God’s reign, but it was so different from everyone’s experience and expectations that little glimpses of it were often frightening.

Jesus’ message that the powers of evil would muster all their strength against him was the most frightening message of all for disciples who hadn’t adopted his perspective. Jesus looked at life from the vantage point of the inbreaking of the kingdom of God. He knew it was like yeast: subtly but relentlessly at work in their midst. Even with clear signs that his enemies were about to strike, Jesus believed that darkness could not swallow up light, and evil machinations would prove impotent against the kind of power God yields. So, he lived as if death did not matter.

The disciples, so enthralled with their own ideas about a messiah and their own fears, missed the most important point of what Jesus was saying.

Even today, when we refer to this as a passion prediction, we truncate Jesus and his message. Each time that he was going to suffer, the promise that he would rise was an integral part of the statement. He warned the disciples that it would look like evil won, but he assured them that it wasn’t true — it wasn’t even possible. Rather than a passion prediction, we could do better to call this a resurrection prophecy.

Jesus also knew that the only way his disciples could believe what he taught was if he showed them it was true. No talk had been sufficient. The disciples continually fell back on their customary way of thinking, trying to outdo one another which is simply another expression of violence.

When words were not enough, Jesus decided to shock them with a sign. He picked up a child and said in effect: “You want to be important? Here’s what important looks like!”

Which of the disciples had to move over to make room for the new, young star of Jesus’ show? In reality he wanted them all to move over — all the way to last place with him. Like the child, he trusted in his Father, and like his Father, he watched out particularly for the little ones.

Jesus was focused on living in God’s promised future while his disciples were caught in the milieu of what they considered probable. The only way to really understand what he was saying was to do what he did, to trust in God as he did. One way to start was by learning to be a servant: servants of God and servants of God’s little ones.
Harsh, contentious words spring forth from these first two readings. Jealousy, scheming, judgment, selfish ambition, revilement, torture, insincerity, greed, possessiveness: They are quite a comprehensive — though not foreign — list of ungodly human behaviors! Yet, if we are truly honest with ourselves and closely examine our own consciences, we can embrace some of our ancestors’ sins as our own.

We can also recall times when we have been the recipients of others’ sinful natures. People we considered friends or colleagues may have lied to us or used us to achieve selfish ambitions; others may have judged us unfairly, been jealous or tried to disparage the gifts God has bestowed on us. And yet, whether we are in the role of sinner or saint, God enters in.

The writer of Mark’s Gospel typically portrays Jesus’ disciples as faithful, but often clueless about Jesus’ mission. Today’s Scripture is a perfect example. As Jesus talks to the disciples about his impending death and resurrection, they don’t appear to show concern or query their teacher about his mysterious, disturbing words. Rather, they quietly begin to debate who among them is the most faithful disciple, as if to secure their place as Jesus’ successor. (Little do they know what that will involve!)

How many times have we looked past another’s words, needs or suffering before calculating how their loss may benefit us? Has one person’s job loss opened up an opportunity for our own advancement? Do we avoid listening to others’ problems because we are too busy with our own? To remind his friends of his mission, Jesus, who is love incarnate, embraces and holds up a child to remind them who is first and most exalted in his kingdom: a child, the most vulnerable, the one who has nothing to give, nothing to take.

We see this human tendency to hoard and covet continue with the people to whom James wrote — those who professed to be followers of Jesus Christ, but whose actions did not reflect Christian behavior. James’ letter reminded them that true peace and wisdom comes from loving and upholding others, not possessing them or succumbing to one’s own passions, pleasures and ambitions. When we pray, how many times do we ask wrongly because we ask without considering the impact our answered prayers will have on others?

In the refrain of today’s responsorial psalm, we find our mantra for the day ... for our week ... and for our lives. Among the thousands of treasured and beloved words and phrases contained in the 150 psalms, we can rest peacefully in these five simple words: “The Lord upholds my life.” ... The Lord upholds my life. When we live each day with this mindset — this deeply embedded truth — all our sins and the sins of those who have hurt us lose their power. Those five words are the salve for those who have inflicted pain upon us. When we focus on our earthly desires, they are the reminder of where our hearts and lives must truly rest: in Jesus who is waiting to embrace us, bring us back into right relationship with God and with our brothers and sisters.

We are challenged today to take stock of the times we have failed to look at the suffering of those around us as we go through life securing our own pleasures. We go forth this week, into a world where sometimes we are judged and sometimes we are the judges, where sometimes our selfish ambitions blind us from seeing and attending to the needs of others, where our jealousy and insecurity cause us to compare ourselves by earthly standards and forget God’s unconditional love. May we remember those five words that bring us back to our center: Say it with me: The Lord upholds my life ...

The apostles’ discussion of who was greatest probably would not have turned violent. But claims and counterclaims of being the greatest or the original often become deadly. The blood feud between East Coast and West Coast rappers claimed many more lives than just their respective anchor pins, The Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur: The murders remain unsolved. Gang wars are obvious examples, but so are rivalries between two guys over a girl or two girls over a guy. The latter warfare is sometimes carried out via drive-by shootings but more often by assassination via texting and social media postings.

As the Depression worsened in the 1930s, it caused severe hardships for millions of Americans. Now, nearly a century later, it is déjà vu as we again see homeless encampments under freeways, people sleeping on the sidewalk, and people with cardboard signs at many street corners.

The Gospel is not about being the greatest and most important person. Called to be servants to one another, especially to the least of us, Jesus continues to put the problem right in our face. He invites us to work on it.
Calling All Prophets!

COMMENTARY | Carol J. Dempsey

Our world is currently experiencing tumultuous situations that have and will continue to have, adverse effects on both human and non-human life. Every nook and cranny of our planet is heating up at a pace never seen before in history. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Fifth Assessment Report, written by hundreds of climate experts and scientists, indicates that recent anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases are the highest in history. Record-breaking temperatures, humidity, sea level rise, and many other factors indicate that Earth is warming fast.

Elsewhere on the planet, poverty has a strangle hold on much of the world’s population. At least 80 percent of humanity lives on less than 10 dollars a day. A by-product of poverty is hunger. More than 66 million primary school-age children across the developing world attend classes hungry; 23 million hungry are in Africa alone. Globally, about 281 million people are undernourished. Furthermore, more than 1.4 million people worldwide die each year from violence. With statistics such as these that grow more dire every day, the words of an ancient biblical text, “Would that all people of the Lord were prophets” are like a scream in the night piercing the silence of a slumbering world — a world too groggy to realize that our neighbor’s terrible plight will soon become our own reality if we do not work together to change the collision course that we are traveling.

This Sunday’s readings remind us that just like our ancestors of old, we too have been given a share of the divine prophetic spirit which is not reserved only for certain people. This spirit is given freely for the sake of all the world’s communities of life. In the first reading from the book of Numbers, the biblical writer features the people encamped with Moses, and God bestowing upon them a share of the divine prophetic spirit that had been given to Moses.

In Psalm 19, this Sunday’s responsorial psalm, the psalmist celebrates God’s law — the decrees, precepts, ordinances — all of which give joy to the heart. God’s law is to be understood as the law of love that encompasses love of God, love of self and love of neighbor. The last two stanzas of the psalm feature the psalmist in a self-reflective mood. The psalmist desires to be divinely cleansed of unknown faults and safeguarded against wanton sin. This divine cleansing and safeguard are necessary when exercising one’s prophetic vocation so that one does not become a living hypocrisy between what one says and what one does.

The second reading from the Letter of James provides a deeper understanding of how the prophetic spirit works. This message, delivered after the time of Pentecost when the church was given the Spirit of God, features James — the so-named author of the text — acting boldly. He addresses the wealthy of his community. With tongue-in-cheek, he invites them to weep and wail over their impending miseries. All that they have gained through injustice will come to naught. The wealth around which they have centered their lives will become worthless, and their lives will follow suit. Justice will be served for those who have been treated unjustly. Thus, acting in accord with the Spirit,
James delivers a stirring message to the rich of his community whose wealth is ill-gotten. Simultaneously, his message is a hopeful one for the poor. Their plight does not go unchecked.

Just as some members in Moses’ camp were surprised to learn that God’s spirit came to rest upon Eldad and Medad who were not in the gathering of the 70 elders, and just as Joshua wanted Moses to stop Eldad and Medad from prophesying—a request that was not granted—so too, John, in Mark’s Gospel, wants Jesus to prevent a certain unnamed person from driving out demons. Eldad and Medad were thought to be “outliers” which is the same situation for the unnamed “exorcist” in Mark’s Gospel. Thus, God’s prophetic Spirit is given freely and stirred up freely, to the surprise of many people who thought they were specially chosen to receive such a wonderful gift. The Gospel closes on a note of muted warning: Be on guard against sin lest it become a stumbling block.

In sum, this Sunday’s readings invite us to ponder the ways of our God whose prophetic Spirit has been poured out freely upon all people, all creation. This gift calls us to speak truth to power, to be open to others who have received this gift, and to be self-reflective for the sake of fostering and maintaining right relationship with all.

NUM 11:25-29

The figure of Moses looms large throughout the Pentateuch. According to the biblical text, from the moment God called out to Moses from the burning bush to commission him to set the Israelites free from Egyptian bondage (Exodus 3), Moses enjoyed an ongoing dialogue with God. Oftentimes, God came in a dense cloud to speak to Moses (19:9). Sometimes, Moses even entered the cloud that covered Mount Sinai, and there he communed with God for great lengths of time (24:15-18). The pillar of cloud became a sign of God’s presence that accompanied the Israelites on their desert trek (13:21-22). The cloud, then, was a prominent image in the Exodus story.

The cloud now appears in the book of Numbers as the Israelites continue their journey to the promised land. This time, however, the biblical writer features God coming down in the cloud to speak to Moses. God is leaving the heavenly abode—the divine dwelling place. Instead of just speaking to Moses, God now acts. God takes some of the spirit that was on Moses and bestows it on the 70 elders with Moses. The elders then begin to prophesy. The biblical tradition recognizes Moses as a great prophet and leader (Deuteronomy 34:10-12). Thus, the prophetic spirit of God is now passed on from Moses to the elders, from one person to the community. Leadership and the power of God becomes a shared experience.

Surprisingly, Eldad and Medad also receive the spirit even though they are not in the company of Moses and the elders, though Moses had also chosen them to receive the spirit. They, too, begin to prophesy but unlike the elders, Eldad and Medad prophesy in the camp. This event causes quite a stir! A young man informs Moses of what is happening, and Joshua implores Moses to cease the men’s activity.

Moses offers Joshua an interesting response. By means of a rhetorical question, he asks him if he is jealous. Jealousy implies a strong desire to possess something that another possesses. Joshua’s concern is not only that Eldad and Medad are prophesying but also that these two men are now potential leaders. Joshua sees them as a threat to Moses’ leadership. Moses’ further response, namely that all people of God be prophets, basically puts Joshua on notice: God’s prophetic spirit is a gift freely given; it cannot be controlled; and from this time forward, the gift of the spirit will rest upon the community and not just on certain individuals. The problem of future leadership is now resolved.

Looking at the passage as a whole, one cannot help but notice that no women are among those receiving the spirit. Women, however, were imbued with God’s prophetic spirit. One classic example of a female prophet is Miriam who, according to the biblical text, is Moses’ sister (Exodus 15:20).

**PS 19:8, 10, 12-13, 14**

Part of a larger psalm, this second section of Psalm 19 is a hymn of praise that celebrates the goodness of God’s Torah. The first part of the psalm (v. 8, 10) describes God’s law: It is perfect, trustworthy, pure and true. The specific effects of the law are several: refreshes the soul, gives wisdom to the simple, endures forever and is just.

The psalmist’s description and characteristics of the law provide a valuable insight into the qualities of a godly life. For the psalmist, the law is the point at which an encounter takes place with the living God whose self is revealed. The qualities attributed to the law are also true of God who is behind the law and from whose authority the law derives its value. In praising the Torah, the psalmist praises the God who is revealed in the Torah. The law, then, bestows life, gives wisdom and elicits joy.

The second part of the psalm (v. 12-13, 14) is a prayer for God’s help where the psalmist speaks directly to God and affirms that righteousness cannot be achieved through Torah alone. In a tone of self-reflection and through the use of a rhetorical question, the psalmist acknowledges the reality that human beings make unintended errors and unconscious mistakes. Hence, the psalmist implores God to cleanse any unknown fault in order to be acquitted and freed of guilt.

After the psalmist asks God to cleanse him, the psalmist then seeks out God’s protection. The psalmist does not want to be ruled by wanton sin. He begs for God’s protection so that power and prestige do not become the dominant forces in life. Only by God’s pardon and preservation can the psalmist be blameless and innocent of much transgression. What is remarkable in this responsorial psalm is the psalmist’s unassuming confidence in God, a confidence that speaks of a wonderful and intimate relationship.
This portion of the Letter of James reflects the social and economic situation of Palestine during the first century C.E. The amassing of tracts of land in the hands of a few wealthy and powerful individuals was common throughout the Roman world. This situation was also evident in the eighth century B.C.E. where the wealthy were adding more and more estates to their land (Isaiah 5:8). The unjust treatment of people by those who have power and wealth was an ongoing problem in the ancient world and remains a problem in today’s world.

James, the alleged author, paints an unpleasant picture of the wealthy hoarding countless riches which are described in terms of fine clothes and precious metals. Clearly, self-indulgence and pleasure have been the dominant driving forces. Those people with power and wealth have self-gratification as their primary objective in life. They give no thought to others, especially the poor whom they have exploited. Of note is the fact that in the time period that this letter reflects, day laborers depended on the daily wage to support themselves and their families. Peasant society was unable to store up money, food or clothing for later times. The peasants lived day by day, and not to earn a wage for the day would lead to a dire situation for both the peasant and the peasant’s family. The rich, then, have exerted power over the peasants. They have denied them their due and have relegated them to a life of poverty, hunger, starvation and, in some cases, even death.

Given the situation, no wonder James writes such a stinging letter of reproach to the economic powerbrokers, and, in this case, the wealthy landowners of the day. In the style and tone of prophetic condemnation in the Hebrew Scripture (Isaiah 13:6; Ezekiel 7:19-20; Amos 8:3, 9), the ancient letter writer announces the woes that are to befall the rich landowners. By using past tense verbs to describe the riches that have rotted away, the clothes that have become moth-eaten, and the gold and silver that have become corroded, James suggests that their day of justice has already begun, and rightfully so. What the peasant land workers have experienced at the hands of the rich, the landowners will now experience themselves — devastation and economic insecurity.

By issuing a tongue-in-cheek invitation to these wealthy landowners, beckoning them to come and weep and wail over their impending miseries, and then, by exposing their injustices, James exercises his prophetic vocation and mission. He speaks truth to power, reminding his readers then and now of how false the security of wealth is. He exposes social injustice and gives hope to those whose suffering is recognized. By acting prophetically, James becomes God’s lightning rod and the people’s conscience.

Surprisingly, those workers treated unjustly offer no resistance. If they did, most likely they would be killed or let go from work. On a deeper level, they become the epitome of nonviolent resistance as they wait for justice.

Is this story not the plight of the poor laborer today in a world that is becoming increasingly immoral economically? And James is calling all prophets!

**JAS 5:1-6**

**MK 9:38-43, 45, 47-48**

Just as the young man in Moses’ camp was concerned about Eldad and Medad receiving a share of God’s spirit, so now in Mark’s Gospel, John expresses concern that someone unbeknown to the disciples is casting out demons in Jesus’ name. The fact that an unnamed, unfamiliar person is able to do this task implies that within this person, God’s Spirit is alive and active.

Furthermore, to cast out demons in Jesus’ name suggests that the man was invoking the power of Jesus’ name in the rite of exorcism. To act in the name of another was to claim that person’s authority for one’s actions. Jesus has received his power and authority from God who enabled Jesus to heal. Thus, the person casting out demons becomes a conduit for God’s and Jesus’ Spirit.

Jesus’ response suggests that no one who claims Jesus’ power will ever speak ill of him, and that no one has prerogatives over others. The grace and spirit of God is given and available to all — women, children, Gentiles, and those who live on the margins, namely, the poor and outcasts. The reference to giving a cup of cold water to drink emphasizes the point that no service, however minimal, will go unnoticed or unrewarded.

The last part of the Gospel features a series of sayings. The phrase “little ones” could be a reference to children (Mark 9:36-37), the unauthorized exorcist (9:38), or any weaker member of the Christian community. The warning against causing one of the weaker or marginal members of the community to abandon faith takes the form of an ancient proverb.

The danger of causing others to lose their faith next shifts to warnings about losing one’s own faith. The series of hyperbolic sayings emphasizes the goal of entering into life or the reign of God, a goal that is so important that whatever would become a stumbling block at this goal, must be cast aside.

Finally, Gehenna was physically a valley associated in the Hebrew Scripture with the notion of the divine judgment (Jeremiah 7:30-32; 19:2, 6). By the time of the Christian Scripture writers, Gehenna had developed into a place of destruction in both body and soul (Matthew 10:28; 23:33).

Thus, these Sunday readings invite listeners everywhere to reflect on the ways of God and the divine law. A call to embrace one’s prophetic vocation goes forth, along with an example of how to live it out. With the reign of God at hand, the time has come to move forward with anyone who is working to bring about the healing and liberation of all.
“At that time, John said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us.’”

Today, we could possibly hear, “Father, we saw someone praying over a sick parishioner, and we tried to stop her because she is not Catholic.”

“Jesus replied, ‘Do not prevent them. There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name who can at the same time speak ill of me. For whoever is not against us is for us.’”

Or we could even hear, “Bishop, we saw a Catholic laying hands on a sick person, and we tried to stop him because he was not a priest.”

“Jesus replied, ‘Do not prevent them. There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name who can at the same time speak ill of me. For whoever is not against us is for us.’”

Sometimes, we are uncomfortable when we see a person, who is not a Catholic or a priest, doing something that we expect only priests to do. It seems that the apostles were just as uncomfortable with a non-believer driving out demons in the name of Jesus.

Jesus sees the issue differently. Jesus gives room for the non-believer to act as he did out of compassion for another.

There is a parallel situation recounted in the first reading. At the command of the Lord, Moses gathered 70 men. The Lord came down in the cloud and bestowed on these men some of the spirit he had given to Moses. At that, the men prophesied in the name of the Lord.

Now, two men had left the camp and were not there when the Lord came and bestowed his spirit. Nevertheless, later, these two men were prophesying in the name of the Lord. Joshua, Moses’ aide, got upset and wanted Moses to stop the two. Moses said, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets! Would that the Lord might bestow his spirit on them all!” Moses gives room for the non-inducted to prophesy in the name of God’s name because of a personal interior calling.

What was driving the complaint of the disciples and Joshua against those who were ministering based on a personal interior call? On the face of it, it seems like jealousy. Sort of: “We thought that we were the only ones appointed to do these works.” In the case of the disciples, it goes even deeper. They had not been able to drive a demon out themselves ... and here was an outsider doing it! And, not much before this, the disciples had been caught in a discussion of who among them was the greatest. Jesus would have none of it: “If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all” (Mark 9:35). They were challenged by Jesus.

Joshua and the disciples had not gotten the point that bringing the message and healing of God was the job of everyone. They were not the sole dispensers of God’s blessings.

We must take care that we, too, do not exclude God’s working through people who are not of our number or who don’t meet our expectations or beliefs. We could easily end up like Joshua and the disciples, trying to limit the work and blessings of God in the world.

Looking at it from another side, is it possible that some people do not do what they are called to do because they think that all ministry belongs to someone else, to someone who is ordained or officially credentialed. It just might be that they are God’s person-on-the-spot to minister to someone — no matter how others may see it.
in Ordinary Time: “Morning after morning he wakens my ear to hear as disciples do; ‘The Lord God opened my ear’” (Isaiah 50:45).

God’s true followers hit the floor listening every morning. What is God telling us today that we didn’t hear or notice yesterday? If we are not open to God’s constant newness, we are simply not open to God. Yet, as the prophet soon noticed, those committed to listening are also destined to get hurt. Though Yahweh strengthens us to hear; others punish us for hearing.

The composer of Psalm 114 takes the more familiar tack of asking God to listen to us. We never lack for petitions, especially during the general intercessions. But we are also expected to keep our ears open to himself at the same time God’s ears are open to us.

The James and Marcan pericopes help us appreciate why there is so much pain in the lives of people who listen. Who is going to get upset with someone promising the usual prayers and thoughts to those in need? God knows best; I’ll just let God take care of it. I have faith in God’s care.

James couldn’t disagree more. “If faith doesn’t have works, it’s dead.” What is the risen Jesus telling me to do in the concrete to help this specific needy person? That is not only where we could get into discussions; we will at times have real tension-filled, knock-down drag outs. Somebody could actually get hurt.

Our Gospel is the first of three Marcan predictions of Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection; each prediction is followed by a misunderstanding, then a clarification on how we are to die with Jesus. Peter delivers the first misunderstanding, prompting Jesus to demand we give our total selves to carrying out whatever Yahweh wishes. A real death, a total commitment to constantly being turned outward, never inward, always staying out of Boomers’ tight places.

Mark’s second prediction and its sequence is our Gospel pericope for the 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time. This time, the misunderstanding belongs to all Jesus’ disciples, arguing over who the group’s head honcho is. Jesus clarifies the dying he expects by insisting all are to be accepted as equal in his community, even children.

It is no accident James thinks it necessary to warn his community of the natural passions which, left unchallenged, will destroy them. Unless we actively cultivate peace and righteousness, we will certainly tear apart the people God created to be one.

The author of Wisdom, one of the first sacred writers to believe in an afterlife, is confident that the relationships of the “just” person builds will last into eternity; no matter the persecution such a unique individual will have to endure. It is always less painful to build walls than to build bridges. Though the author of Psalm 54 probably knew nothing of heaven, he was convinced that it is always more rewarding to have a relationship with, than to wall ourselves away from Yahweh.

Those whose spirituality revolves around Scripture harbor a scary secret. Just when we think we got the “faith system” down, God does something to blow our tried and true thesis to smithereens. We can’t find three better readings to expose that secret than the ones we will proclaim on the year’s 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time. God simply doesn’t follow the rules we presume are set down and worse yet, doesn’t even apologize for such erratic, divine behavior.

Joshua discovers this very quickly. This pericope’s rules are clear: All newly chosen elders have to go out to the special tent of revelation to receive some of Moses’ extraordinary prophetic spirit. Yet Eldad and Medad, though they never make it to the tent, still receive Moses’ spirit and “and they prophesied in the camp.” Joshua complains to Moses that law and order have been broken. But instead of giving a cease and desist order against the two, the great lawgiver does the opposite: “Would that all the people of Yahweh were prophets.”

Mark’s John doesn’t seem to have heard this Numbers passage, else he wouldn’t have complained to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us.” Many of us Christians haven’t heard this passage either. The Gospel Jesus’ answer is classic. “Do not prevent him! ... Whoever is not against us is for us.” What good haven’t we achieved simply because we followed the rules and regulations and didn’t consider the needs of the people? A lot of people perished from thirst because we stopped unauthorized individuals from sharing their cup of water with the thirsty. Which of our sinful, comfortable ideas of God need to be cut off and thrown away? Remember what Mark’s Jesus said about people being more important than laws back in Chapter 2? He really seems to have meant it. Unless we rid ourselves of the idea that following laws are at the heart of our faith, we’ll never be his disciples.

Both Mark and Matthew begin their Gospels by having Jesus remind his disciples that the first step in following him is to “repent;” to create a metanoia, a total change in their value systems. The author of James couldn’t be more graphic about that metanoia. Such a change, for instance, forces us to shed our preconceptions about being rich. Instead of being a lifestyle for which we long, it is a way of life we try our best to reject and avoid, one of those “unknown faults” from which the writer of Psalm 19 wants us to be cleansed. If the risen Christ is a new creation, so those who follow him must also become new creations.

Our sacred authors are convinced faith is an evolving experience. Not something we, once upon a time memorize, then fall back on for the rest of our lives. Never was it meant to be the tight confines we squeeze into when we’re hard pressed. On the contrary, the Gospel Jesus presumed his faith would help us face life’s storms, not run and hide from them.

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This week we return to the Gospel according to Mark. Today’s readings raise the issue of obedience to God’s commandments. The first reading strongly urges the Israelites to “observe them carefully, for thus will you give evidence of your wisdom and intelligence to the nations.” The Gospel, however, nuances advice as Jesus distinguishes what is more basic from what is less important. Those “less important” laws were considered God-given, but Jesus recognizes that some laws override other lesser rules.

That’s a principle that planners need to remember when some rules contradict others (e.g., what can be in the bread when it should look like real bread). Even more important is to remember that the ultimate commandment is the two-fold command of love that Jesus taught.

Love is expressed in many ways. One that people may not think of quickly is giving of our resources in the collection. James says, “All good giving and every perfect gift is from above” and also speaks of us being “a kind of firstfruits” of God's creatures. I wonder how many of your parishioners see what they give in the collection as an act of love. How many recognize that their giving is “from above” and that it is a kind of “firstfruits” offering? Israel offered the firstfruits of the harvest as a sacrifice, which indicated their recognition that the whole harvest belonged to God and was to be used according to God’s will. Do your parishioners recognize that all they have belongs to God when they put a share of it in the collection?

Obviously, there is much richness here that is often overlooked. How can you help your parishioners appreciate more fully the meaning and spiritual significance of their giving? This might even increase the giving somewhat, but that is not the main goal. What is important is that the collection becomes truly a part of the worship, not just a functional need that interrupts the action of the liturgy.

If parishioners’ giving in the collection reminds them that everything they have belongs to God, that should also lead them to a fuller response to God throughout the week. James also calls us to be “doers of the word and not hearers only.” He goes on to insist, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” What a powerful statement and challenge to all of us that is!

Can these themes find a place in the homily this weekend and/or in the bulletin or the petitions? As Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians, Chapter 13, if we do not give out of love, then our giving is empty.
PLANNING | Lawrence E. Mick

The readings call our attention to God’s healing power. Isaiah foretold: “Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing.” Jesus fulfills that prophecy in the Gospels, including the man with hearing and speech problems.

The church continues that healing ministry in various ways, but the primary channel of that ministry is the anointing of the sick. It has been more than 45 years since the revision of this sacrament was issued. That’s more than two generations, yet we still have many Catholics who do not understand this sacrament or know when to ask for it. Though many of them don’t come to church and only call when someone is on their deathbed to ask for the “last rites,” there are many in our pews who still need sacramental catechesis regarding the anointing of the sick.

This would be a good weekend to preach and teach about the anointing and about Viaticum, the proper sacrament to request when death approaches. Homilists and planners should work together to provide a comprehensive catechesis to the parish, perhaps supplementing homilies with bulletin inserts or posters at the entrances or small cards to take home with guidelines for requesting each sacrament. If you are unsure of those guidelines, read the introduction to the book, *Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum* or contact your diocesan worship office to seek a resource you can use.

A strong way of catechizing on anointing, of course, is celebrating the sacrament within Sunday Mass. That requires prior explanation to the parish about who is the proper subject of the anointing, but the experience of sharing in the sacrament with other parishioners teaches the value of asking for the anointing before the last minute. Is this a good weekend for your parish to celebrate the sacrament at Mass? You may need to spend this weekend preparing the people for a celebration later in the month, but this is still a good opportunity for catechesis on it.

Often, it works best to have the anointing at one or several of the regular weekend Masses, but in some situations, a separate Mass (on Sunday afternoon) might work better if you are transporting homebound parishioners to the church.

This Sunday is also Grandparents Day (in the U.S.), which some may dismiss as just another marketing ploy. Whether it is or not, it’s still a good opportunity to acknowledge the role of grandparents in guiding their grandchildren in life and sharing their faith with them. The *Book of Blessings* does not offer a blessing for grandparents, but *Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers* has one (pg. 191) that could easily be adapted for use at the end of Masses this weekend.

PRAYERS | Sue Robb

INTRODUCTION

We gather today as the blind person who does not see the suffering in our world. We are the deaf person who does not hear the cries of the poor and the mute who fails to speak up against injustice. We come to Jesus for healing so we may speak out against people and systems that oppress and silence the voices of the least among us.

PENITENTIAL ACT

Lord Jesus, in your mercy, you are strength for the weak and oppressed: Lord, have mercy.

Christ Jesus, in your mercy, you heal the blind, deaf and mute: Christ, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, in your mercy, you give love and hope to the broken and lost: Lord, have mercy.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Is 35:4-7a Be strong! Fear not! Here is your God!
Ps 146 Praise the Lord, my soul!
Jas 2:1-5 Show no partiality
Mk 7:31-37 He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak

PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

Presider We ask God to open our ears and eyes to the needs of our world so we may respond with the awareness and love of Jesus Christ.

Minister We pray for good health and strength for Pope Francis who tirelessly proclaims Jesus’ healing love and mercy to the world ... we pray.
✧ For the health and well-being of all healers: those who heal our physical ailments, those who free our mind from stress and worry, and those who lovingly guide us closer to Christ. Together may we heal our broken world ... we pray.
✧ For those who have no voice: the poor and marginalized, victims of human trafficking, the unborn and those suffering from all forms of mental illness ... we pray.
✧ For forgiveness and conversion of mind and heart, for those of us who are spiritually blind to the needs of the poor; for the spiritual deafness that keeps us from hearing the cries of the oppressed, and for the times we have witnessed suffering and failed to act ... we pray.
✧ For healing and protection for our Earth and its natural resources; for an end to all practices that endanger animals and their natural habitats; for compassion for all creatures great and small ... we pray.
✧ For God’s eternal peace and perpetual light to all who have died due to the violence, through drugs, war, poverty, homelessness, lack of clean water and medical services, abortion and suicide ... we pray.

Presider God of mercy, we need your healing. Open our ears, hearts, eyes and mouths to proclaim your greatness. Protect all with no ability to protect them and systems that oppress and silence the voices of the least among us.

Praise the Lord, my soul!
PLANNING | Lawrence E. Mick

The third Sunday of September is designated worldwide as Catechetical Sunday. It is a day to acknowledge and pray for those who serve as catechists for the parish and also a time to reflect on the breadth of the catechetical ministry itself. One aspect of that breadth is the role of parents in catechizing their children, so the materials from the U.S. national office for celebrating this day include an optional blessing of parents. If you ask catechists to come forward or to stand for their blessing, be sure to include catechists for Christian initiation, adult faith formation leaders and pre-school catechists along with the elementary and high school ministers. For the U.S., such materials and more information may be found at www.usccb.org (search for “Catechetical Sunday 2018”).

The theme this year is “Enlisting Witnesses for Jesus Christ.” That theme reminds us that catechesis is not just about passing on doctrines and moral principles. It is intended to facilitate a deeper encounter with Jesus Christ and thus lead to a deeper living of our baptismal commitment.

Today’s readings support that theme. The first reading reminds us faith begins with listening to God’s word but often leads to suffering that drives us to rely on God. The epistle insists faith is dead if it does not lead to good works. In the Gospel, Jesus makes it clear that professing faith in him must be lived out and will lead to suffering for his followers as it will for him.

The reason that suffering so often accompanies faith is that following Jesus requires us to work for justice and care for the needy in society. This always arouses enmity from those who live by greed and power, and they are usually the ones who have the money and power to impose their will on others. So, like the prophet Isaiah in ancient times, today’s prophets are often abused and even killed by those whose power is threatened by the truth.

Catechists, too, may experience opposition at times if they teach the fullness of the Catholic tradition, which includes a large body of social teaching calling us to work for justice and peace. Preachers may also find resistance to some aspects of Catholic teaching that disturb the rich and powerful in society. But this kind of opposition is not limited to church ministers. Every Catholic is called to spread Catholic teaching beyond the church walls and to witness to the truth of Christ’s teaching in our world. That will bring opposition in many situations, so good catechesis must provide both the knowledge and the commitment to follow Christ when it is convenient and inconvenient.

The above paragraphs might give preachers some thoughts for the homily today, and they might also provide a number of concerns to shape the general intercessions and the choice of hymns.

PRAYERS | Sue Robb

INTRODUCTION

Within our Scripture readings today are deep, and at times, controversial questions. Jesus asks his disciples: “Who do people say that I am?” Then he asks Peter, “But who do you say that I am?” Like Peter, all Christian faiths today proclaim that Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one. Despite our common proclamation, the second reading often serves as a proof text that separates Catholics from our Protestant brothers and sisters. Does faith alone save or does faith combined with corporal and spiritual works save us? These questions invite us to delve more deeply into the mysteries of God.

PENITENTIAL ACT

Lord Jesus, you place in us a desire to know you more deeply: Lord, have mercy.

Christ Jesus, you are the perfect example of faith and good works: Christ, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, you lead us into the ever-unfolding mystery of God’s love: Lord, have mercy.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Is 50:5-9a The Lord God is my help
Ps 114 I walk before the Lord, in the land of the living
Jas 2:14-18 Faith without works is dead
Mk 8:27-35 Who do you say that I am?

PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

Presider Trusting that God answers our questions and prayers, let us lift up the needs of our world.

Minister We pray for all Christians: for unity and loving acceptance of our theological differences with our Protestant brothers and sisters; for the ability to see and lovingly honor Christian and non-Christian beliefs that challenge our own; for an end to religious persecution in all parts of the world ... we pray,

❖ For peace for those who question their faith; for those who do not believe in God; for those who feel God has abandoned them ... we pray,

❖ For an increase in our spiritual and corporal works of mercy to ease the suffering of the poor, the homeless, the hungry, the lonely, the sick, the imprisoned and the dying ... we pray,

❖ For healing and peace for those sick in mind, body and spirit; for first responders, medical professionals and caregivers of the sick and dying, for compassion and patience in difficult times ... we pray,

❖ For all martyrs, known and unknown, who have given their lives for their faith; for those who have sacrificed their lives to save others ... we pray,

❖ For all the prayers and unanswered questions we hold in the silence of our hearts ... (pause) ... we pray,

Presider God of all people, let these prayers strengthen us to see others as you see them and to extend your love and mercy to all. This we ask through Jesus, the Christ. Amen.
PLANNING | Lawrence E. Mick

Are there ever any conflicts in your parish? Silly question, isn’t it? A humorous adage says, “Two Jews; three opinions.” That applies to any gathering of humans, not just Jews. Conflict seems endemic to human interaction, at least at times.

This is not a new problem in the church, as today’s readings make clear. The prophet, Wisdom says, is rejected and attacked “because he is obnoxious to us; he sets himself against our doings, reproaches us for transgressions of the law and charges us with violations of our training.”

Conflict can even occur among those who seek to lead the parish’s worship life. Why is this? In today’s epistle, James says, “Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice.” Can jealousy and selfish ambition creep into our ministries? Think of a lector who gets angry when he or she is not scheduled for a big celebration like Christmas or Easter Vigil. Or of a planner whose ideas are not embraced by the larger group. Or of conflicts between planners and presiders. There are multiple situations that are open to jealousy or personal ambition or hurt feelings that can lead to open conflict among parish ministers.

Again, this is not new in the church. In the Gospel, we see conflict among the disciples of Jesus, a conflict that flows from a desire for status and honor, the wish to be recognized as the “greatest” or most important among the followers of Jesus. Jesus uses the image of a little child to call them to be servants of all.

The difficult aspect of this is that it may not be an indication of base motives or petty desires at all. Conflict can arise simply because two people see things differently, even if both of them are acting out of sincere and selfless motives. They both want the worship of the parish to be as good as possible, but they have different ideas of what that means.

So how do we avoid conflicts and, more importantly, how do we resolve them when they occur (because they will)? Again, the letter of James gives us advice: “But the wisdom from above is first of all pure, then everything that is in keeping with perfect goodness and with peace, which comes from God.” That’s a tall order and a long list of virtues but underlying them is the fundamental virtue of humility. We who seek to serve the community must constantly nurture humility in our hearts. Humility reminds us that we don’t have all the answers or always the best ideas. Humility assures us that we are not ultimately in charge of the liturgy; God is. So, we can relax a bit when our ideas are not followed and trust God to work through all of us, who are all imperfect instruments of God’s will.

PRAYERS | Sue Robb

PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

Our desires and possessions sometimes keep us from following Christ. As the disciples argue about who is the greatest disciple, Jesus embraces a little child — innocent, powerless and with nothing. Today, let us be open to the ways we try to place ourselves above others and ask for the grace to be like the child Jesus embraces and a faithful servant to all in need.

INTRODUCTION

Minister For the universal church and her leaders; for hearts of humility that respond to the needs of the poor and the outcast; for continued strength to minister to our broken world … we pray.

Presider May the prayers we present be in accord with God’s will and may we unite our hearts with all in need of our prayers and assistance.

For freedom and peace for all who are tortured physically, emotionally and spiritually; for all who suffer religious and political persecution at the hands of their leaders; for an end to war and conflict … we pray.

For humble awareness and sorrow when we are consumed with jealousy and selfish ambition; when we desire to control people and hoard possessions and resources from those in need … we pray.

For the protection and safety of children everywhere, especially those who do not have access to food and clean water; medicine or safe living environments; for the aged and the unborn; for the homeless and victims of human trafficking … we pray.

For conversion of mind and heart for all who abuse, torture, kill and control others; for all in prison; for all who cannot let go of past hurts … we pray.

For peace for all who have died due to violence in our society; for healing in families who have lost children and loved ones due to hate crimes and war; for all who have gone before and those who are loved ones who have gone before us … we pray.

Presider Loving God, you uphold our lives. May these prayers be not for our glory, but for yours. Open our hearts to work for justice so our world is safe for all. This we ask, through Christ, our Lord. Amen.
The ministry of the prophet keeps showing up in the readings of Ordinary Time. Perhaps, that’s a good indication of the importance of the prophetic vocation in our world. Prophets speak for God calling people back to God’s ways. Doing so is never easy, because most of us don’t like to be reminded when we are not living up to our best selves, the people God made us to be.

Today’s readings highlight the role of the prophet in several ways. The first reading reminds us that God calls people in different ways to prophesy. Seventy of the elders in Moses’ time received the spirit of prophecy in a ritual gathering. Two others, though, missed the event yet still were filled with the spirit and began to prophesy.

In the epistle and the Gospel, we are reminded of the reason we need prophets. The epistle reveals James as a prophet, chastising the rich for wage theft and abuse of the poor. In the Gospel, Jesus challenges us to be diligent in avoid temptations that lead us to sin.

There are those in every age whom God calls to be prominent prophets, people who confront the powers of evil in very public ways, often drawing attention from the media. But God also calls people to prophesy who are otherwise ordinary citizens and members of the church. In fact, the words of Moses suggest that God calls all those who receive the Spirit of God to prophesy: “Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets!”

All the baptized have received the Holy Spirit, and in the Rite of Baptism of Children, we proclaim that the baptized share in Christ’s ministry as priest, prophet and king. We may carry out that mission in various ways in different situations, but it always calls for speaking the truth, especially when we see injustice and oppression.

Within the worship arena, preachers carry the clearest burden of prophecy, of course. They are called to proclaim the word of God clearly and apply it to contemporary situations, which often means challenging the way our society thinks and operates.

Planners, too, have a prophetic task for parish worship. Situations that cry out for change and justice must be regularly included in the general intercessions. Music choices need to frequently highlight God’s call to care for the needy, to free the oppressed, to assist the needy, and to work for peace.

Planners might spend a little time together discussing what issues in your area and in our world need our attention during worship. How can you be prophets to your community and also call all members of the parish to carry out their own role as prophets in our society?

INTRODUCTION

What if all of us here today embraced the role of prophet! Would that all of us listened to the cries of the poor and realized how our sins of gluttony and greed contribute to global problems! How would our world, our community, our lives be changed! These are the challenges today’s readings place before us. May our minds and hearts be open to seeing ourselves in them.

PENITENTIAL ACT

Lord Jesus, you came to us as priest, prophet and king: Lord, have mercy.

Christ Jesus, you call us to be priests, prophets and leaders in the world today: Christ, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, send your Spirit upon us to enlighten and strengthen us for your mission: Lord, have mercy.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Nm 11:25-29 Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets!

Ps 19 The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart

Jas 5:1-6 Come rich, weep and wail

Mk 9:38-43, 45, 47-48 Whoever is not against us is for us

PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

Presider God of mercy and compassion, hear and answer these prayers and strengthen our resolve to serve you in building your kingdom.

Minister We pray for all priests, prophets and spiritual leaders who have devoted their lives to proclaim Jesus Christ to the world: May they be strengthened in their mission ... we pray,

 For those who store up earthly treasures and deny the poor just wages: May they hear the cries of the poor and respond with generosity, compassion and recompense ... we pray,

 For those whose sins of addiction cripple and bind them: May the grace and mercy of God free them from all earthly desires and may they help others on their journey to be free from addictions ... we pray,

 For all who use their unique God-given gifts to work for justice and peace: Like Medad and Eldad, may each person’s talents be recognized and honored as they work to build God’s kingdom ... we pray,

 For peaceful rest for the weary, healing for the sick, strength for the weak, and hope for the lost: May we be instruments of love and compassion to all we meet ... we pray,

 For all who will die today, especially those who will die alone: May they be welcomed into heaven by all the angels and saints ... we pray,

Presider God, giver of all grace and mercy, hear the prayers we place before you and those we hold in the silence of our hearts. Strengthen our resolve to devote more of our time, talent and treasure to those in need. This we ask, through Christ, our Lord. Amen.