

exploring

THE SUNDAY READINGS

YOUR GUIDE FOR THE MONTH OF SEPTEMBER 2018

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OPENING PRAYER

Loving God, your son Jesus taught us to become like little children to prepare for your reign. As the school year begins, we ask your blessing on all children and their teachers, protectors, and providers. May our children learn well and be free from anxiety, bullying, and danger at school and in the home. In Jesus' name we pray. *Amen.*

September 2 | LECTONARY 125
TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

WHEN IS A RULE NOT A RULE?

FIRST READING

DEUTERONOMY 4:1-2, 6-8

What great nation has statutes and decrees that are as just as this whole law?

We U.S. citizens are proud of our documents, from the Declaration of Independence to the Constitution to the Bill of Rights. We're collectively grateful to live in a free society regulated by laws that protect each of us the same, rich and poor alike. At least, that's what we hope they do. The reality doesn't always match the ideal, which is why our leaders are continually elected and laws frequently amended or replaced. We've been on the way to "form a more perfect union" for two and a half centuries. Perfection is still up ahead somewhere.

We appreciate the pride of Moses in establishing the divine law for his nation. Why not brag about the kind of people who might emerge from this discipline? Ah, but people are rarely as fine as their documents. Living up to our lovely words remains the challenge.

» *If you could wave a wand over our country and change three things, what would they be?*

SECOND READING

JAMES 1:17-18, 21B-22, 27

Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves.

It used to be said that we attended church to "hear Mass." When the liturgy was in Latin, it's possible that hearing Mass was the best we might expect to do.

Our participation was limited to a few responses we'd memorized to repeat at the correct times. Otherwise, we were there to watch, maybe to hear, but rarely to participate. Many of us didn't dare to receive communion more than a few times a year, if that.

Mass is in the vernacular now, but that doesn't mean things have changed. Many of us arrive to observe Mass with all the vitality of watching a slightly boring but familiar show on TV. We may hear, but that's not the same as listening. And even listening isn't the same as receiving a word and intending to act on it. James calls this behavior a delusion. A word that doesn't become flesh is as good as unspoken.

» *If the doors of every church closed tomorrow, how would you express your Catholic faith?*

GOSPEL

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

"This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."

The problem with Jesus, according to his religious leaders, is that he has an underdeveloped respect for laws and traditions. The problem with religion, Jesus insists, is that it makes people prefer superficial law-keeping to vital personal transformation. Laws, rules, and traditions are attractive because they draw such clear lines between law-abiders and law-breakers. We know who's who, and we like assigning these labels because they assure us we're safely in the right.

Jesus dispenses with rules big and small when a greater law applies. Washing rituals were useful and healthful but not always practical for a traveling band. The Sabbath, a very big obligation, still took a backseat to healing the sick, a matter of charity. Jesus declares that laws exist for the people, not people for the laws. It's a compelling and fateful distinction.

» *Have you ever broken a rule or tradition to honor a greater value?*

September 9

I HEAR YOU

LECTIONARY 128
TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

ISAIAH 35:4-7A

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared.

I'm pretty sure life is simpler if we don't pay attention. If we choose not to see or hear what disturbs our peace, and refrain from visiting or mentioning hard realities, we can probably live a cheery little life in a bubble of denial. I've spent more than one season in a happy protective bubble where I stopped watching or receiving outside news. I refused to engage family conflicts, suffering friends, and problematic community members. I just wanted to do my work and not invest myself in drama.

Alas: life is drama, and existence in a bubble is not life. In order to love, we have to open our hearts to whatever comes. Some of that will be unpleasant, disturbing, even wildly alarming. Real life interferes with our peace, but that doesn't mean we're robbed of it altogether. Trusting in God, we can dare to see, hear, walk, and speak where life takes us.

» *What's been hard to see or hear? Where has been difficult to go? What's challenging to say?*

SECOND READING

JAMES 2:1-5

Have you not made distinctions and become judges with evil designs?

The biblical problem is often stated as an inability to see clearly or to hear the truth. It's also described as an unwillingness to go where we're called, or to speak what we're given to say. But sometimes the problem is that we place too much emphasis on the information our eyes take in. We're swayed by fancy clothes or lovely skin. We ignore completely the needs of one who doesn't smell good and hasn't enjoyed lifelong dental care.

To details like these, we're advised to close our eyes. In the same way, the person who agrees with us may be nicer to listen to, but the one who challenges our way of thinking should also have our ear. Jesus warns Peter that he would be taken where he didn't want to go. Prophets routinely speak words unpopular to say. Sometimes our instincts must be ignored, to let in a greater truth.

» *When have you found it more helpful not to see, not to hear, not to move, not to talk?*

GOSPEL

MARK 7:31-37

But the more Jesus ordered them not to speak, the more they proclaimed it.

Take a moment to appreciate the irony. First, Jesus heals a man who can't hear or speak. Then Jesus orders him not to speak, but the fellow doesn't seem to hear it. He can't keep his mouth shut about what just happened. Seriously: could you?

The deeper question, of course, is: why wouldn't Jesus want everyone to know he could do things like this? Isn't it good for business, so to speak, to let everyone know he's powerful enough to command such a healing? While there's nothing wrong with a little advertising when it comes to truth, it's often a matter of timing as well. Similarly, Jesus chooses to keep the transfiguration vision under wraps, and he prefers to teach the disciples a lot of lessons after the resurrection they weren't prepared to receive earlier. Sometimes we have great advice to give our loved ones. But they're not ready to hear it.

» *When has the truth been real, but the timing been wrong?*

September 16

LECTIONARY 131
TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

GETTING THE MESSAGE STRAIGHT

FIRST READING

ISAIAH 50:5-9A

See, the Lord God is my help; who will prove me wrong?

Being wrong is part of being human. I hate to admit it, but I'm wrong about a lot of things. I misremember events of my own life. I attribute quotes to the wrong authors. I make judgment errors, most of

which thankfully do not cost too much to undo. Once in a while I hurt people by saying something that sounds innocent to me, but is quite offensive to someone else.

Chances are you're wrong from time to time (though I could be wrong about that, and if so, I beg your pardon). Our language is full of phrases for what we must do when we find ourselves in error: eat crow, humble pie, our hat or our shoe.

However you say it, we need to swallow words we formerly uttered in confidence. The only thing we can be sure of is the security of remaining humble before God and others. If we take the lowest chair, the only place to go from there is up.

» *Isaiah's servant of God is stubborn for God's truth and not his own. How often do we*

mistake one for the other?

SECOND READING

JAMES 2:14-18

So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

For too long, faith was presented as getting the facts straight about God. We had to be clear that there's only one God. Yet that one God is revealed in three divine Persons: Father, Son and Spirit. We had to know that Jesus is God's son, and that he remains fully human while fully divine. We had to embrace heady doctrines like Original Sin, Immaculate Conception, Incarnation, and Resurrection. If we could agree to a standard set of concepts like these, we had faith.

Faith is not an event that happens in the head. Nor is it the sum of sentiments held in the heart: love for God, Jesus, his

mother, the saints, or the Church. When we hear "faith," we should think "trust". If we place our trust in God above all things, we act loyally from within that relationship. Real faith is not in the thinking, but in the doing.

» *How have you demonstrated your faith this week?*

GOSPEL

MARK 8:27-35

Along the way, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

One of my favorite days of the year is this one: Catechetical Sunday. Part of the reason I like it is because I'm a catechist, a teacher of the faith. I also appreciate the chance to celebrate all the people who communicated their faith to me through

the years: my parents, teachers, pastors, mentors, and friends. I'm grateful too for the example of the saints, the writers of spiritual books, all the folks I've never met who taught me by their heroic living and deep reflection.

Jesus is a catechist. He teaches his disciples in lecture-like instruction and also by his example of prayers, compassionate healings, and willingness to forgive any sinner and restore them to grace. One of the most interesting ways Jesus teaches is by asking significant questions. He doesn't answer them, but leaves them open for our ongoing reflection.

» *Who has been significant in the formation of your faith? How do you answer Jesus' question today: "Who do you say that I am?"*

September 23

LECTIONARY 134

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

DIRE PREDICTIONS

FIRST READING

WISDOM 2:12, 17-20

Let us beset the just one, because he is obnoxious to us.

The writer of the Book of Wisdom seems like he had a crystal ball in which he read the future with great accuracy. This description of the attack on the just one sounds like a precise forecast of the fate of Jesus in Jerusalem. Since this is an Old Testament text, we may wonder: why don't Jewish readers see the similarities we do? One big reason is that Wisdom—like Tobit, Judith, Sirach, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees, and parts of Esther and Daniel—isn't in the Jewish Bible. These texts were long believed to be written outside of Israel in Greek, which disqualified them from inclusion. Only after the 20th-century discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls did we learn some of these texts had earlier Hebrew or Aramaic origins. Composed about fifty years before Jesus, Wisdom sets the stage for what some religious people were thinking in the generation Jesus

would soon inhabit.

» *What will future people learn about us from the literature and media we produce?*

SECOND READING

JAMES 3:16-4:3

Where do the wars and where do the conflicts among you come from?

Wouldn't it be a relief if someone could discover the source of human violence and pull the plug on it? The writer of the Letter of James suggests that violence begins not in the world, but in the human heart. The problem isn't that your ideas are different from mine, or that I may live higher on the hog than you. Violence doesn't spring up naturally from disparity. But violence and disparity have the same root: in "jealousy and selfish ambition." When we strive to possess more and supplant others, conflict breathes its first breaths.

What's the cure? Wisdom—which seeks to travel the way of peace,

gentleness, compassion, and fidelity.

Wise people are dedicated to the common good, not to personal gain. It's like the popes keep saying: if you want peace, work for justice.

» *Consider present conflicts, locally or globally. How might justice lead to peace in these situations?*

GOSPEL

MARK 9:30-37

"The Son of Man is to be handed over to men and they will kill him."

When a prediction comes true, we marvel at the foresight of the person who saw the future coming. Modern-day seers include economists, business leaders, inventors, and most moms. It's not a crystal ball they're reading, but the signs of the times. A thoughtful person can often make a very good guess where a particular route might lead given enough consideration of the clues.

Did Jesus predict his execution

because of divine foreknowledge or because he was alert, intelligent, and well versed in the ways of the human heart? Factor in that he was definitely reading the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and possibly the Book of Wisdom. Great

minds converge on the understanding that people smitten by power will do what they must to stay in power. Between the Romans and the religious leaders, the wind was blowing in the direction of violence.

» *What could be read in the signs of our times? What predictions would you make for the near future?*

September 30 |

BEFORE THERE WERE PROTESTANTS

LECTIONARY 137
TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

NUMBERS 11:25–29

“Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp. Moses, my lord, stop them.”

It must have seemed like a crisis of leadership. Moses had served as the voice of God for the Israelites for a long time. He was frankly tired of being the sole truth-teller for the nation. Commissioning seventy elders to share the spirit of prophecy with him seemed like a great idea. Eldad and Medad, advanced in years like the rest, didn’t manage to mosey over to the commissioning ceremony. The prophetic spirit came to them all the same.

Some folks had a problem with that. Some folks always have a problem when due process isn’t respected, rituals flex too far, or laws are bent to the breaking point. There’s a right way and a wrong way to do things. Eldad and Medad didn’t make the meeting. Shouldn’t that disqualify them from prophesying? Moses, for his part, was glad for the help. He wasn’t going to quibble about where it came from.

» *Inclusion and exclusion can be tricky lines to draw. What are your standards for determining what’s in or out of bounds?*

SECOND READING

JAMES 5:1–6

You have fattened your hearts for the day of slaughter.

Is it moral to be rich? This is a question that Christians have answered in different ways at different times. Some hold that wealth is a sign of blessing from God. Therefore, it’s very moral to be rich, and a signal of immorality if you’re poor. Debtor’s prisons are the fullest expression of this doctrine, known as the prosperity gospel. It makes poverty a sign of faithlessness, if not a crime outright.

A competing theology is the social justice gospel, which insists that the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the few is a form of immorality. As long as some people are in need, individual possession of great volumes of wealth creates tension and leads to envy and violence. James definitely views piles of riches in a negative light. A fat wallet will go the way of the fatted calf—the one invited to every feast but never to celebrate.

» *Kings, queens, successful merchants, and other wealthy folk have become saints. How does the rich person slip through the needle’s eye?*

GOSPEL

MARK 9:38–43, 45, 47–48

“Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons....He does not follow us.”

Long before there were Protestants, or Catholics for that matter, all the followers of Jesus were Jews. And still distinctions were drawn between “us” and “them”—between those who hung with Jesus and those who used the right name but didn’t belong to the right gang. Jesus adopts the same attitude as Moses when confronted with the reality of outliers: “Whoever’s not against us is for us.” Translation: guys, what’s your problem? We can manufacture enemies in every nook and cranny of the world if we define who’s “one of us” too narrowly. And we can discover surprising friends and allies everywhere if we draw the boundaries of inclusion more broadly. Jesus said that he has sheep outside of the present flock that he chooses to lead (John 10:16). Set your fence too close to home, and risk shutting out the friends of Jesus.

» *Theologian Karl Rahner speaks of “anonymous Christians,” who obey the law of love without benefit of baptism. Have you known Christians who are not Christian, and non-Christians who are?*

LET US PRAY...

Creator of all, you spoke and all history came into being. We thank you for the stories that inspire our hope and ignite our imagination. Bless your Church, striving to be faithful in an era of doubt. Lead all who seek the truth into the path of your light. Through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

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