

exploring

THE SUNDAY READINGS

YOUR GUIDE FOR THE MONTH OF OCTOBER 2018

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OPENING PRAYER

Source of all life, we pledge to honor the sacred character of life that you create and sustain at every moment. We promise to defend the unborn and the dying, those who are sick, poor, fragile, different, or vulnerable in any way. We pledge to protect this planet, its water, air, soil, forests, and creatures. Through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

October 7 | LECTONARY 140
TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

WE NEED EACH OTHER

FIRST READING

GENESIS 2:18-24

The LORD God said: "It is not good for the man to be alone."

Loneliness is rotten. It feels bad and it's proven scientifically to be an unhealthy condition. Loneliness leads to depression, bad eating habits, poor self-care, and a weaker immune system. So even if you're not a joiner, join something: a church, a gym, a civic service group, a birding club, or a Red Hats card game. Join the party, in other words. Life isn't meant to be a solitary pursuit.

And don't take my advice, or your doctor's—take it from the Bible. The first human wasn't around long before God decided to create a second one, according to the story. What's interesting is that God deliberately chooses to make the second one the polar opposite of the first. God might have made Person Number Two a virtual clone of Number One. Yet God chooses differentness, which leads to discovery, challenge, growth, and generosity. Why surround ourselves with clones and ditto-heads, when we can stretch and be

enlarged with richer relationships?

» *Are most of the people you know the same or different from you: in race or culture, belief or politics, economic or educational background, gender, age, or worldview?*

SECOND READING

HEBREWS 2:9-11

He who consecrates and those who are being consecrated all have one origin.

Here's a banality that needs to be taken to heart: people are different. While I might prefer that family members, friends, and fellow citizens see the world just as I do, they simply don't. Each life context is different, depending on your gene pool and family of origin, the place you grew up, the economic realities that shaped your options, the people who loved you or didn't, the examples you've had, the years that have passed, and the experiences you endured or selected.

At the same time, it's also true that people are the same. We're in need of

basic food, clothing, and shelter, a sense of belonging and purpose, even love. We all need to know, in tiny ways every day, that our lives matter to someone, or as we say in our catechism, that God loves us. We share an origin in God that binds us together even if we wander far apart. Our hope for the future rests in conversation and dialogue, sharing our stories and our goals, finding our common ground underneath all the nonsense that gets heaped on top, and makes us feel so distant and alien.

» *Are there people with whom you reject the idea of common kinship? What would it take to see them as sisters and brothers?*

GOSPEL

MARK 10:2-16

"Let the children come to me; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these."

We tend to value people based on what they can produce. Geniuses, surgeons, and world leaders make vital

contributions to society and are accorded honors, better pay, higher security. The average Joe and Josephine, not so much. Before Joe and Josephine enter the work force, or after they retire, they may be valued even more lightly, because their contribution likely has no dollar sign attached to it.

Jesus, with his usual paradoxical

kingdom standards, assigns great value to the poor, the sick, the foreigner, and the child. In ancient times, these individuals made no discernible contribution and were more likely viewed as liabilities. Even today, a child's value is negligible by many standards. But children carry the future in their little bodies. They are heirs to the kingdom, and bear heaven's special blessing.

» *Do I value and respect people according to what they produce? How do I demonstrate the worth of children in my values and choices?*

October 14

LECTIONARY 143

TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

MAKE WAY FOR THE IMPOSSIBLE!

FIRST READING

WISDOM 7:7-11

The splendor of wisdom never yields to sleep.

Do you consider yourself to be wise? How much time have you spent with the wisdom literature of the Old Testament? This subset of Scripture comprises books like Proverbs, Sirach, Ecclesiastes, Job, the Psalms, Song of Songs, and the book of Wisdom itself. These are not cookie cutter books, by any means. Proverbs and Sirach are collections of pithy sayings on how to live, while Ecclesiastes sounds like a late-life faith crisis in motion. Job is bookended by a folk tale, but in its heart is a searching exploration of the meaning of human suffering. Psalms is a prayer book and the Song of Songs a love story. The book of Wisdom is the most curious part of the wisdom collection. It advances the theology of Israel by light years and helps us appreciate the religious thought of the generation just before Jesus. All together, this collection of texts tells us that wisdom isn't just about swallowing the right facts. It includes questioning and praying, living and loving, thinking and doing. Wisdom shapes our ability to discern, and to act.

» *Who has shown wisdom in history, in the present generation, or among the people you know? What are the qualities of a wise person?*

SECOND READING

HEBREWS 4:12-13

The word of God is able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart.

Occasionally, perhaps not as often as we'd like, we encounter others who can read us, people who seem to really see and understand us. When it happens, it's such a relief that we may act boldly to respond to this summons to be wholly present and alive to another. We choose this person as a friend, mentor, or perhaps even a marriage partner. It's a special blessing if you find more than one or two such people in your life.

I was blessed in my teens to meet a religious sister who seemed to recognize something good in me. At the time I felt like a rag doll, a throwaway person, someone not worth much attention or investment. But Sister made a commitment to draw me out and convince me that God had a purpose for me, even if I couldn't see it. Her eyes were so kind, her words so compelling, and her insistence so persuasive, I gave in to her idea of me wholeheartedly. Who wouldn't? Which of us wouldn't prefer to see ourselves as God sees us? If we could, it would be an amazing vision to live up to.

» *When you listen to the Scripture proclaimed, do you ever feel personally addressed? Do the words ever rouse you to life?*

GOSPEL

MARK 10:17-30

"For human beings it is impossible, but not for God."

Why are you here? The odds are fair that you might not have made it this far. Consider all the near escapes you've had, childhood accidents, dumb risks you took, illnesses that might have gone another way. I remember riding my bike into a tunnel that was off limits to bike traffic. It was night, and the tunnel was poorly lit. A bus barreled through the tunnel right behind me. I should have been smashed to smithereens. How did that bus manage to miss me, or pass right through me? I've wondered about that for decades.

If you're reading this, you're still here. Why are you here? What are you doing with your life, what is it for? So much about existence is improbable, seemingly impossible. We achieve things that appear beyond our grasp. We're loved even when we deem ourselves unlovable. We succeed when all bets are on failure. We recover from wounds to our dignity that feel fatal at the time. We survive losses no mortal should come back from. And our faith tells us that even death won't have the last word. Who are we to doubt this?

» *When has the impossible proven possible in your life?*

DRINKING FROM THE JESUS CUP

FIRST READING

ISAIAH 53:10-11

Through his suffering, my servant shall justify many.

Holy Communion is such serious business, I wonder how so many of us dare to get up and receive it, Sunday after Sunday. Eating this bread and drinking this cup has very clear-cut ramifications. We're participating in the life of Jesus, and also in the death

SECOND READING

HEBREWS 4:14-16

So let us confidently approach the throne of grace.

First, there's the moment of humility when we say: "O Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof." And that's the truth. We're not worthy to stand in the presence of Love itself. We don't deserve to be on the same continent with Love some days. Taking

gratitude to confidence?

Have you ever refused to forgive or to be forgiven?

GOSPEL

MARK 10:35-45

"Can you drink from the cup that I drink?" They said to Jesus, "We can."

Every time I hear this story, my heart twists painfully. James and John are so sure they can drink from the Jesus cup. How readily they tell him, "We can!" And they can't. Which they'll come to realize in just a matter of days.

I want to shout out from the pews and across the centuries:

Guys, guys, don't say it! Don't make that stupid request and even more ignorant pledge. Positions next to Jesus in his glory are not what you think. Those stations will be taken by two common thieves, strangers to this story, while you're saving your skins across town. Sharing a cup with Jesus is not just an honor to be enjoyed; it's more urgently a surrender of your very selves.

Then I consider how I make the same miscalculation, week after week. I drink from the Jesus cup, I recite creeds and profess allegiances. Yet you'll find me cowering across town and under the covers when the hour comes for courage, and the real price of religion is being paid.

» *On this World Mission Sunday, what are you willing to sacrifice, and how far does your courage go for what you profess?*

GOD WANTS US, WAITS FOR US, DELIGHTS IN US. NO MATTER WHAT WE'VE DONE, **THE ONLY WRONG MOVE HERE IS TO REJECT THE OFFER OF GOD'S BOUNDLESS COMPASSION.**

of Jesus. We take on the responsibility to inhabit Christ-life and to be Christ-bearers into the world, like Mary of Nazareth so long ago. This bread and wine are, in faith, crucified flesh and blood poured out for the sake of the world. Do we really intend to participate in a life this daring, a death this costly?

Of course, most of us aren't thinking about this as we spill out of the pews and head toward the front of the church. We're just getting communion, receiving a sacrament that we've received to no worse effect for years or decades. It seems like no big deal, even with the Stations of the Cross tacked up around the church like so many warning signs that this way of Jesus is not as carefree as it may seem.

» *The just one suffers for justice' sake. How much have I been willing to risk for justice?*

the identity of Christ into our bodies and our beings is not something we'll ever deserve to do. So forget being worthy, and concentrate on being grateful.

This is what I tell myself, anyway. Yet to move from gratitude to confidence requires another leap of faith—a leap the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews invites us to make. We're surely not worthy, but we are forgiven by a mercy so deep that we can approach God without the least fear of rejection. How many relationships have we enjoyed in which this were true? God wants us, waits for us, delights in us. No matter what we've done, the only wrong move here is to reject the offer of God's boundless compassion. The only thing more powerful than the mercy of God is our freedom to say no to it.

» *How difficult is the movement from humility to gratitude, and from*

HEY YOU—YES, YOU!

FIRST READING

JEREMIAH 31:7-9

The LORD has delivered his people, the remnant of Israel.

Vocation is a tricky business. What does it mean to be called by God, after all? Does it mean some of us are special, while the rest are run-of-the-mill? Does it mean that we're each predestined for some great work—if we can just figure out what it is in time to do it? How does God call us? Is there some dog-whistle we should be listening for? How do we know for sure when a divine tap falls on our shoulders?

The Hebrew prophets were so sure God was speaking to them. Jeremiah, Isaiah, and the rest: they proclaimed "the word of the Lord" as confidently as if they received it hand-delivered to their door each morning. They were faithful to the God who they knew would be faithful to Israel. Do we share that loyalty and certainty? Do we speak and act as if we do? Are we prepared to live in joyful hope each day? Or do we expect more of the same; which is to say, not very much?

» *Reader's choice: pick one or two of the questions above and reflect on how you understand the nature of our Christian call.*

SECOND READING

HEBREWS 5:1-6

No one takes this honor upon himself but only when called by God.

Today is Priesthood Sunday. Interestingly, this day was designed by the Serrans as a lay-led effort to acknowledge and encourage local parish leadership. Yet too often, the last Sunday of October comes and goes without a whisper of gratitude expressed to the pastor. My advice is, don't wait for anyone else: send a card, invent a ritual, invite your pastor to dinner, shake his hand after Mass, and thank him for being there!

In ancient times, the priesthood of Aaron passed from father to son. There were so many Levite priests, they had to find rich patrons to adopt them as their house priest. Those days are gone. Catholic priesthood is not a birthright (a good thing considering the celibacy clause). An increasing number of US parishes are yoked two or three together under one pastor. Some parishes are run by deacons, religious sisters, or lay leaders. If you have a priest to shake hands with, consider it a privilege. Priesthood is no one's idea of an easy career path. Only love would compel someone to this kind of service.

» *What have you learned from your best pastors? What can you learn even from a difficult or incompatible pastoral experience?*

GOSPEL

MARK 10:46-52

"Take courage; get up, Jesus is calling you."

Even a blind man knows how to respond when Jesus crosses his path. Why is it so hard for us to follow the instincts of Bartimaeus? Courage seems to be a key ingredient in the response. It can be easier to cry out for Jesus to hear our plea, and more complicated to get up and reach out for the grace that's offered to us.

There are sections of the road of life we don't want to travel. We clamor for change, for answers, for guidance, for options. But are we really open to those things, or have we set our hearts on one reply only and refuse to accept any other? Bartimaeus is the rare person healed by Jesus who immediately determines to fall in behind Jesus all the way. He doesn't know where Jesus is going, but wherever it is, that's the way Bartimaeus chooses to go. This turns out to be the best response to the call, however it comes to us. Resolve to follow, step by step, into the unknown. Trust that Jesus knows the route, and that faith in his companionship is all we really need.

» *When have you felt summoned beyond your own safety to something more? How might you be called in this season of your life to more?*

LET US PRAY...

Lord of mystery and prophecy, you reveal marvels to us and invite us on a lifelong journey of discovery and charity. Widen our vision, deepen our compassion, and create in us a clean heart, ready to serve you in the needs of our sisters and brothers. Through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

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