

# exploring

## THE SUNDAY READINGS

YOUR GUIDE FOR THE MONTH OF JULY 2019

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### OPENING PRAYER

All-powerful God, in the name of your Son the demons of the world are rendered helpless. May his name be spoken in our prayers with reverence and confidence, so that the evils of this generation will have no authority to cause harm to the poor, the vulnerable, the young, and all creatures with whom we share this earth. *Amen.*

**July 7** | LECTIONARY 102C  
FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

## TODAY IS FOR JOY

### FIRST READING

ISAIAH 66:10-14C

**When you see this, your heart shall rejoice, and your bodies flourish like the grass.**

The cross is, without a doubt, the primary symbol of our faith. It testifies how deep the love of God goes, and how far into the human story God is willing to wade to share our circumstances and rescue us from suffering. But the cross isn't the whole story of Christianity. Always on the other side of that grim sign are the promise and the pleasure of Easter morning. We need a symbol for this, too. We need some equally communicative sign that testifies to the liberating joy of what we believe.

Isaiah reaches for a metaphor great enough and wonderful enough to contain the victory of homecoming that his nation felt after the return from a generation in exile. What the prophet lands on may be surprising: a mother nursing her child. The confidence, security, and satisfaction of that little one in Mama's arms is the equal-and-opposite response to the desolation and isolation of the cross. And isn't it curious: six centuries after the time of Isaiah,

Mary of Nazareth comes to provide the Church with precisely that same sign?

» *Consider the countless images of Mary you've seen in your life. Which one speaks most joyfully to you?*

### SECOND READING

GALATIANS 6:14-18

**May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

Mother Mary comes to me on one side; the cross of Christ sustains me on the other. It's not an either/or proposition. We don't have to choose between happy religion and sad religion, between Advent's sparkling lights and Lent's stark disciplines. In fact, if we view these aspects of Christianity as separate camps that we must decide between, we haven't understood the story at all. No human life is relentlessly sunny or uninterrupted misery. The symbols of our faith remind us that, in good times and in bad, our God is there to share the journey.

So: don't toss your childhood Madonnas in the dumpster, and don't presume that rugged crucifix is old-time religion without meaning in 2019. On

some days, my serene office Madonna gives me the high-five when things go sparkingly well. But there are as many days when a bloody Mexican crucifix reminds me I'm not alone on this road to Calvary. Christian faith is for all of life. You'll be glad to find your whole experience welcome.

» *How many religious symbols accompany you on your daily path? What does each convey that makes it helpful, even necessary?*

### GOSPEL

LUKE 10:1-12, 17-20

**"Rejoice because your names are written in heaven."**

The final week of Jesus' life is so compelling in its details that we spend a full week of every year reflecting on it. Only the first day of that week, Palm Sunday, is a happy experience. The rest is a quicksand rushing toward tragedy.

So we may be pardoned for overthinking the dire parts of the gospel story. Yet no one followed Jesus originally because of the way he died. The first disciples were drawn in by the way he

lived. Jesus taught with authority (not like other religious leaders). He backed up soothing words with healing actions. He spoke of justice and then treated the poor and the unwelcome with dignity and tenderness. He denounced evil and then bounced demons out on their ears. The

day-to-day story of Jesus was a litany of joy for those who followed after him. We can't afford to forget joy as we follow him today.

Let's make room for joy in the practice of our faith. Attend Mass like you're really celebrating. Dare to smile in church. Let

them know you are Christian by your laugh. Bring joy to others daily, too.

» *Who or what brought me joy recently? How can I bring joy where I go today?*

**July 14** | LECTONARY 105C  
FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

## WE JUST WANT TO GET IT RIGHT

### FIRST READING

DEUTERONOMY 30:10-14

**"It is something very near to you, already in your hearts, you have only to carry it out."**

I know a lot of people who do things that are ill-advised, sometimes even downright wrong. (Full disclosure: sometimes I see one of these people in the mirror.) But I don't know very many people who want to cause harm to others. We all make dumb, thoughtless, selfish choices. Yet we generally make them because we want something that sounds like it would be good, if only for ourselves. That it has rotten consequences overall is the reality we wind up regretting most. Is there a way to avoid that wish-I-could-take-it-back, day-after feeling?

Yes! We can listen to the divine summons that emanates from deep within. The way of God—which is AKA the way of love, peace, joy, justice, truth, and goodness—isn't a mystery that needs to be solved. It's really not complicated at all. Why would God open a path to good living that was impossible to figure out? The right way to live is as accessible as silence, as near as our own heartbeat, as clear as the bell of conscience. Listen. Reflect. Act.

» *Do you make time for stillness and attention in your life? What helps you to pay attention to the small still voice of God?*

### SECOND READING

COLOSSIANS 1:15-20

**Christ is before all things, and in him all things hold together.**

Making decisions takes some brainpower. Do we choose the cheapest option or the best quality? Do we follow the path of least resistance or the most noble? Do we take the job that pays the most or one that enables us to use our skills to the utmost? Do we vote for the candidate who protects our interests or one who seeks the common good even if it costs us something?

If we make decisions using the slide-rules of mathematics, science, economics, power, or personal gain, the outcomes will reflect the standards we apply. St. Paul proposes another measurement: Christ himself. What he means by this is we should consider Christ as the essential factor, the glue that holds everything together. Paul doesn't suggest we forget math, or throw science under the bus, when we decide. But if we begin our reflection with Christ at the center, all other considerations take shape around this fundamental one. The world is always so much more than the sum of its parts.

» *In decisions, we consider values like morality, money, relationships, time, effort, risk, pleasure, personal growth, likely gain or cost. List and prioritize values that are most significant to you.*

### GOSPEL

LUKE 10:25-37

**"Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"**

Even though I'm a practicing Catholic, I admit whole weeks go by without my giving a thought to eternal life. Present life is so compelling: who has time or room to contemplate the what-ifs of the infinite? The practical displaces the metaphysical every time. The need to fix lunch seems more imperative than prepping for the life of the world to come.

Yet along comes this professional religionist, testing Jesus with a pious question about everlasting life. They trade textbooks responses and are in apparent agreement that love is the key. Then Jesus throws the textbook out the window, launching into a story that changes the elements of the argument altogether. Forget classical expressions of loyalty to God and neighbor. Do mercy to your enemy instead!

Jaws drop whenever Jesus teaches. He confounds our easy piety and self-promoting righteousness. Jesus asks us to love as God does: beyond the nice boundaries of our comfort zone. Follow Jesus for an adventure in extreme loving!

» *Draw a picture of your heart. Include who's in and who's out. Draw God's heart around the whole. Contemplate this image.*

## CALLING ALL MARYS AND MARTHAS

### FIRST READING

GENESIS 18:1-10A

**“Quick, three measures of fine flour! Knead it and make rolls.”**

Hospitality doesn't serve itself, as any good host knows. When guests are coming, we clean the corners that don't usually get cleaned. We use the china that's better than everyday. We cook and bake. We punch the pillows and hope everyone feels like lingering longer than usual. We want our guests

### SECOND READING

COLOSSIANS 1:24-28

**In my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.**

It's one thing to punch the couch pillows to make your guests more comfortable. It's another to share in their sufferings and to shoulder their burdens. Can we edit the scope of our hospitality and flicker the lights when we expect our guests to go home?

Certainly we can't give what we don't

### GOSPEL

LUKE 10:38-42

**Martha had a sister named Mary who sat beside the Lord at his feet.**

Most of us refuse to pit Mary against Martha anymore. That's one of the oldest games in Christianity, and it doesn't serve either woman's honor very well. Mary is the contemplative disciple, Martha the busy server. The Church can't do without either personality. Let's not pretend Martha's

service is an inferior gift, or that Mary's attention to Jesus is more sincere. The best parishes have truckloads of Marys and busloads of Marthas. We'd miss either one if there were a sudden shortage.

Still, we have to

deal with Jesus' reply to Martha that Mary has chosen the better part. Jesus reacts to Martha's criticism of Mary's apparent carelessness. Jesus points out Martha's anxiety about "many things"—not the wrong things, mind you, but multiple distractions. Martha's worrying makes her uncharitable toward her sister, and distracts her from her beloved guest. The better part, we can imagine, would be for all of us to keep our focus on Jesus at the center, not on each other's behavior.

» *Is your heart more “Mary” or “Martha”? How might you make more room for the “other sister” to shine?*

JESUS, ON THE NIGHT BEFORE HE DIED, OFFERED US A MEAL OF THANKSGIVING THAT HAS A PLACE SET FOR US WHENEVER WE ARRIVE.

**HOSPITALITY IS NOT AN AFTERTHOUGHT IN THIS RELIGION. IT'S WHAT WE DO.**

to feel at home—only better.

Because of Abraham and Sarah's remarkable hospitality on the day heaven came calling in the form of three strangers, their descendants continue to value welcoming as a special Judeo-Christian virtue. Biblical believers like us are charged to make room for travelers, refugees, and other strangers. We remember the terrible mistake made by those who denied room to a very pregnant woman and her husband one special night. We know that Wisdom sets a table and calls everyone to her feast. We celebrate that Jesus, on the night before he died, offered us a meal of thanksgiving that has a place set for us whenever we arrive. Hospitality is not an afterthought in this religion. It's what we do.

» *How many ways do you exercise welcome for those in need?*

have. I once had a neighbor who liked to talk. I always had to make up an excuse to get her to leave my apartment. One night I decided to see how long she would talk if left to herself to terminate. She talked until 4:30 am—and *then* I had to throw her out anyway.

Most people do not present black holes of need. And to be honest, most of us can be more generous with our abundance than we presently are. We hold onto what's ours out of entitlement, not fear of material insecurity. We avoid people who are hurting because they make us uncomfortable, not because "there's nothing we can really do anyway." We may not be ready to give the mile, but perhaps we can surrender another inch.

» *Imagine the kingdom of your generosity. How far do its borders extend? What treasure is kept in a vault untouched, and how much is shared widely?*

## DIGGING DEEPER

### FIRST READING

GENESIS 18:20-32

**"See how I am presuming to speak to my Lord, though I am but dust and ashes!"**

We all want a friend like Abraham. He'll go to bat for you even if the opponent is God. Abraham is willing to bargain God down from the total destruction of two wicked cities to calling off the demolition completely for the sake of ten decent people. It takes a while, but since Abraham has been walking with God for years, he feels the relationship can stand a little earnest debate.

There's also the matter of divine integrity. After all, God befriended Abraham because Abraham's a trustworthy man. What a horror it would be for Abraham to discover that *God* is not trustworthy! If the innocent die with the guilty, God's justice means nothing.

One problem, though: ten decent people can't be found in those two cities. The citizens fail the test of hospitality with their cruelty and violence. God agrees to warn Abraham's relatives to leave before the destruction starts. Alas, some refuse to go. Lot's immediate family departs, but only three survive. Divine generosity is immense—but it can't save us from ourselves.

» *A lack of hospitality turns out to be a fatal spirit. Where do you see a dangerous inhospitality at work?*

### SECOND READING

COLOSSIANS 2:12-14

**Even when you were dead in transgressions, Christ brought you to life....**

Consider the deep hospitality of Jesus. He invites sinners to share his supper and feeds them with his own life. But even more, he heads out like a good shepherd and actively seeks those who stray from his guiding presence. Jesus offers healing to those who can't afford it but need it the most: the poor, those whose minds and bodies have been broken a long time, the ones society has written off, including the enemies of his nation. Jesus forgives those for whom he suffers and dies—even the ones who take part in his execution. This kind of radical hospitality frightens us. We're quite sure we don't want to imitate it.

We can never be as generous with our welcome as God is. But divine hospitality sets the standard that reminds us we can never be too generous, or kid ourselves into thinking we've done all that can be reasonably expected and have fulfilled our obligation. The sky's the limit, and most of us still have our feet on the ground. Time to dig deeper.

» *Grade yourself on your current level of generosity and hospitality. Where are you challenged to give a little more away?*

### GOSPEL

LUKE 11:1-13

**"Do not bother me; the door has already been locked. I cannot give you anything."**

Sensible people lock their doors at the end of the day, if not well before. This formally closes our responsibility to the outside world. Once the door is locked, don't bother to knock. Come back tomorrow after the sun is up and the coffee's on.

Yet Jesus compares the generosity of God with the person who gets up and out of bed after the locking of the door to assist a friend in need. If you and I would do this when the persistent banging of the midnight visitor gets too bothersome, how much sooner—and in a better mood—will God answer our needs?

We all lock our doors at certain points in every relationship: when the demands get too frequent, when we're tired or worn down, when our own cares command our attention, when resources run low and our hearts seem to run dry. Sometimes the limits are thoughtfully set and the door must remain locked. But once in a while, we should check our door policy. Are we, perhaps, selling the demands of hospitality a little short?

» *Who has opened a door for you that might have otherwise remained locked? How do you know when it's time to unlock a door for someone else?*

### LET US PRAY...

Generous God, your Son teaches us to ask for what we need with confidence. Jesus promises that if we seek fervently we will find, if we knock persistently the door will open. Give courage and strength those who are most in need of your consoling help, and dry the tears of those who weep with your tender mercy. *Amen.*

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