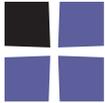


exploring

THE SUNDAY READINGS

YOUR GUIDE FOR THE MONTH OF AUGUST 2020

VOLUME 29 | NUMBER 11 | WRITTEN BY **Alice Camille**



OPENING PRAYER

Let us pray... Lord of mercy, you ask us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, protect the vulnerable. Yet the poor Christ cries for bread and seeks a welcome all around us. Give us the grace to repent this sin and to change our hearts. In Jesus' name we pray. *Amen.*

August 2 | LECTIONARY 112A EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME **A WORLD WITHOUT WANT**

FIRST READING

ISAIAH 55:1-3

Heed me, and you shall eat well, you shall delight in rich fare.

Do you pray before eating? The opportunity to eat is such a blessing, gratitude is the obviously right response. Even a quick bow of the head, silently giving thanks before a meal, acknowledges that we recognize food on the table for the gift that it is. One in nine people will go hungry today. More than seventeen million of our fellow citizens live in food insecure households, meaning they literally can't count on the next meal, and may have to decide who gets to eat in their homes today. One in five American kids live in families without enough food to go around. Nearly four million elder Americans suffer hunger today. Isaiah describes God's vision for how things are meant to be: no one goes hungry, and none suffer thirst. Seeing food as a blessing is the first step toward a world in which everyone shares that blessing.

- » *How many ways do you show appreciation for a meal: prayer, thanking the cook, savoring each bite, sharing your table with others?*

SECOND READING

ROMANS 8:35, 37-39

What will separate us from the love of Christ?

It's such a brave statement. What could possibly diminish our relationship to Christ: pain, anxiety, oppression, hunger, need, danger, enemy attack? The bold answer: none of these things! Then comes the inevitable episode of suffering, in which you and I say, "Why is God doing this to me? If God won't protect me, what point is there in being faithful?"

A dear friend of mine just received a grave diagnosis of spreading cancer. And she told me, "All I feel about this is gratitude for a life full of gifts, love, and family." This is the response to personal catastrophe we each hope to have! But it doesn't spring up without firm roots in everyday acts of faithful loving living. We can't just wish to be heroes; we have to start living like heroes—one thoughtful choice at a time.

- » *Consider some decisions you'll have to make today. How might you make them "heroically"?*

GOSPEL

MATTHEW 14:13-21

"There is no need for them to go away; give them some food yourselves."

We wait for it, as we do for the other shoe to drop. The gospel no sooner mentions hunger before someone has to answer for it. Sometimes it's God, responding with manna from heaven and water from a rock. Sometimes it's God's prophet, as when Elijah and Elisha supply bottomless jars of oil or abundant barley loaves for food insecure families. But in this case, when the disciples tell Jesus that the people need to eat, Jesus surprises them—and us—by saying, "Feed them yourselves." So we do. We send checks to organizations that help famine victims. We bring canned goods to the food bank. We vote for candidates who support school lunch programs and a living wage for workers. We share what we have, so that everyone may have enough. And we work toward being a society that seeks justice for all of its members so that no one goes hungry.

- » *What needs exist in your community, and how can you be responsive to them?*

August 9

LECTIONARY 115A
NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FINDING GOD IN BIG AND SMALL

FIRST READING

1 KINGS 19:9A, 11-13A

After the earthquake there was fire—but the LORD was not in the fire.

We look for God in big, powerful situations that we can't control. That's why we call them acts of God: hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, fires, and earthquakes that buffet us about and tear our belongings and our futures apart. Acts of God, so called, come in quieter and more personal manifestations that are equally brutal and fateful: injury, illness, loss, divorce, sudden financial reversals. Like a tornado, such events can flatten your whole world while the rest of reality around you is left standing and untouched.

Elijah learns in the story that God is not always or merely in the grand and grave events where we expect divine authority to be expressed. Acts of God are also tiny, gentle things: a kind word delivered at the right moment. Wildflowers blooming in a weedy lot. Sunshine after a grey day. Hope, even when things seem hopeless.

» *Where have you encountered the Lord "passing by" so far today?*

SECOND READING

ROMANS 9:1-5

For I could wish that I myself were accursed... for the sake of my own people.

So Paul knew what it was like, too. To hold a conviction close, to value it with heart, soul, and strength—and to be unable to communicate that great truth to those whom he loved the most. Paul was convinced Jesus was the fulfillment of Judaism. But he couldn't make his fellow Jews see it that way. The constant lament of Catholic spouses of their mates, and parents of their children, remains: *they don't go to church*. They don't share my faith and ideals. They don't consecrate their relationships, baptize their kids, feel the same urgency about what's important. It's natural to feel anguish at holding something dear and seeing it dismissed or devalued by your loved ones. But as Paul recognized, people are free to go their own way. So Paul, a Pharisee, ironically cast his lot with and spent his life for Gentiles willing to share his great love for Jesus.

» *How is Catholic identity shared, or not shared, in your family? Do you find a "spiritual home" with others who share your sense of what's most important?*

GOSPEL

MATTHEW 14:22-33

"O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Sometimes we find God most clearly in the little things: a lopsided heart drawn by a child. A summer breeze through an open window after a stifling hot day. A pancake served with a blueberry smile across it. Yet at other times, divine authority is just as obviously at work in the big events: a dramatic rescue from danger, a miraculous recovery from sickness, or a courageous stand against evil.

How are we do respond to this message? Get out of the boat. Get back in the boat. These two directives may seem contradictory, but what holds them together is that we follow Jesus each way. If Jesus invites us to take a risk, to walk on water with him, we should trust that and step out of the boat. If Jesus is in the boat, calming the sea, we should get back in ourselves and rejoice that the storm is over. Where Jesus is, is where it's happening.

» *Where are you today—in the boat, out of the boat? Is life wild and threatening, or calm and secure? Either way, where is Jesus?*

August 16

LECTIONARY 118A
TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

WHAT IF GOD IS FOR US—AND FOR THEM?

FIRST READING

ISAIAH 56:1, 6-7

The foreigners who join themselves to the LORD... I will bring to my holy mountain.

It has to be said, biblical Israelites were just as nationalistic and tribalistic as people are today. They trusted their kin and their kind.

They didn't like foreigners and suspected foreign ways. They wanted to keep others out of their society so their community would remain "clean" and pure of outside influences. They built a wall of laws around their culture to preserve it and to keep their children inside of it.

Then along comes Isaiah, who breaks rank with traditional views by declaring

that God loves outsiders, too. God choose foreigners to become servants of the holy, which is precisely what Israelites presumed themselves to be. "My house shall be called a house of prayer for *all* peoples," the prophet declares in the name of the Lord. What now?

» *What if God's kin and kind*

extends beyond the definitions of yours and mine? What happens if God loves people we don't like at all?

SECOND READING

ROMANS 11:13-15, 29-32

I am speaking to you Gentiles, in as much as I am the apostle to the Gentiles.

It must have been weird to be Paul. For him to utter the phrase, "I am the apostle to the Gentiles" must have been like catching a glimpse of yourself in a funhouse mirror: distorted and strange, but still familiar. Paul was, after all, a Pharisaic Jew, a student of the best rabbinical school in Jerusalem. Choosing the life of a Pharisee meant being dedicated to Jewishness and separateness. His identity rose and fell on a thousand little rituals and rules that he

faithfully kept every day that distinguished him from outsiders. So how do you leap from there to "apostle to the outsiders"?

This is the best proof that God has a sense of humor: God chose a Pharisee to bring the gospel to the outside world. But there might be an even funnier proof. God is also choosing *you* to do the same.

» *Name three ways you can "bring Jesus" to others today without ever saying his name?*

GOSPEL

MATTHEW 15:21-28

"It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs."

This disturbing story from Matthew's gospel (from a slightly softer version in Mark chapter 8) best illustrates how Jesus was a product of his culture—and also

that he transcended it. Since we're used to thinking of Jesus as Son of God and worker of miracles, it's hard for us to deal with those instances when Jesus is leaning hard into being Son of Man and product of Nazareth. I appreciate these glimpses of Jesus when he's not totally evolved, when he's got to resist familiar patterns and influences like the rest of us. Coming from first-century Nazareth, Jesus had to learn that everything he was taught wasn't necessarily true. Being ritually pure wasn't the most important value. Keeping the law and failing to love wasn't right. God wasn't just the Lord of the children of Abraham. And sometimes, a foreign woman might say something you need to hear.

» *What old patterns and influences have you had to unlearn? Which still cause you the most trouble?*

August 23

LECTIONARY 121A

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

IDENTIFY YOURSELF!

FIRST READING

ISAIAH 22:19-23

Thus says the LORD to Shebna, master of the palace....

This is what we know of ol' Shebna, so-called "master of the palace." He was chief of staff for King Hezekiah, a weak ruler during the time when Isaiah was the main prophet in Jerusalem. Hezekiah needed a lot of counsel to get through the average day. Isaiah, and Shebna, both had their work cut out for them.

However, Shebna was no great shakes as palace master. In the fuller passage for today, Isaiah reveals that Shebna has carved himself quite an elaborate tomb, more fitting for a king than a servant. Maybe Shebna was cooking the books and skimming the profits? Isaiah announces that Shebna is getting bounced, and a fellow servant will take his job. (Spoiler alert: the next guy works out no better.) Elsewhere, Shebna is identified as Hezekiah's scribe. Maybe his fall wasn't so far. Or perhaps, literacy couldn't be wasted.

» *We all move through various seasons in life, some honorable, others disgraced. Draw a timeline of your life's ups and downs.*

SECOND READING

ROMANS 11:33-36

For who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor?

The more you read the Bible, the more you realize it's not just a book, but a whole library. And all these writers are quoting or referring to each other's texts—without always providing the courteous citation. The original audience recognized the references. In our less aural culture, we don't hear the reference and could use the footnote.

Here Paul quotes Isaiah, followed by Job, and presumes we're good with that. Curiously, he's using Greek texts and not Hebrew ones, as a rabbi would. It's one more reason Paul's an outsider to the

Jerusalem Christians: he's from Tarsus in Cilicia (modern-day Turkey), not born and bred in Galilee like the original disciples. Paul didn't walk with Jesus, but often claims to know more about the mind of Christ than the Twelve do! Those who think our current Church has factions should read the New Testament again.

» *The early Church was no dream community of peace and joy. What issues divide the Church today?*

GOSPEL

MATTHEW 16:13-20

Jesus said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

Most people reading this will identify themselves as Christian, maybe Catholic, most likely as believers or at least churchgoers. But what do all of these categories mean, and which is the most important claim for us to make in expressing our identity?

Jesus asks his followers to identify who he is. In order to do that, we also have to reveal who we are in the religious scheme of things. We can't claim Jesus as Lord, for example, unless we're willing to identify as his servants. We can't call him Son of God unless we're prepared

to be worshippers. If he is Savior of the world, then we have to let ourselves be saved. If he's our teacher, then we better be prepared to learn our lessons. When it comes to naming Jesus, we name ourselves in the same measure. Who is he? And who are we?

» *Make claims about the identity of Jesus that matter most to you. Consider what each claim demands of you in turn.*

August 30

LECTIONARY 124A
TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIPS

FIRST READING

JEREMIAH 20:7-9

You duped me, O LORD, and I let myself be duped.

Let's begin by admitting that all relationships are difficult, if the relationships in question are with human beings. I have rather placid dealings with trees and flowers and other rooted things. But people drive me crazy. Are we surprised that our experience of God is less like a tree and more like a family member? Are we further surprised that our relationship with God is often as knotty as the one we have with our nearest relative? Jeremiah wrestles in private with the demands of being God's prophet. For him, it's an endless anguish of delivering unpopular messages that result in mistreatment and ridicule—and ultimately, in his murder at the hands of his countrymen. Maybe writing down these skirmishes with God are, for Jeremiah, a sly form of revenge. For as long as there are Bibles, the world will know how miserable it is to be God's prophet!

» *Make a list of your difficult relationships. What is similar about these conflicts? Do you experience these or similar issues in relationship to God?*

SECOND READING

ROMANS 12:1-2

Do not conform yourselves to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.

As believers, our relationship with the secular world can be challenging. Let me put it this way: it *should* be challenging. If you sense no conflict at all between life as a Christian and as a first-world citizen, it may be time to switch parishes. The present age seeks comfort, individual advantage, entertainment, and insularity from the pain of other lives in other places. Christianity summons us to identify with Christ on the cross. No two paths could be more at odds.

We believers aren't chasing the next big thing. We're after "what is good and pleasing and perfect," in Paul's words. If that sounds like the latest version of an iPhone, we have to start from the beginning. The goal is to conform ourselves to God's will: the very definition of good, pleasing, and perfect.

» *Have you gotten too "conformed" to the present age? Are you more uncomfortable in the mall or in church?*

GOSPEL

MATTHEW 16:21-27

"Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me."

Peter was impassioned in his devotion to Jesus. He left home and boat and livelihood to follow his Lord and teacher for years—as the record shows, for the rest of his life. So how hard must it have been for Peter to hear these words from Jesus: *You are the ultimate evil. You are in my way.*

If you said that to any of your friends, you might lose them.

Jesus said tough words to Peter. And Peter wasn't very loyal to Jesus when he said three times to perfect strangers: *Who, Jesus? Never heard of him.*

Friendships have hard moments. But genuine love is able to surmount even difficult words, angry hours, and hurt seasons. If the relationship is important enough, love will find a way around every obstacle.

» *Consider your most valued relationships. Were there times when it seemed that communication was ended, only to be reconciled and renewed?*

LET US PRAY...

Lord, we fear that we're like Peter: an obstacle to your will being done in the world. We harden our hearts against our neighbor and seek our own good over the common good. Melt us, mold us, fill us, use us to make this community under Christ's name a genuine reflection of your divine love. *Amen.*

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