September 24
MIND-MELDING WITH GOD

FIRST READING
ISAIAH 55:6–9
So high are my ways above yours, and my thoughts above your thoughts.

Fans of Star Trek know that First Officer Spock had a talent for tuning in to the thoughts of any creature he could lay his hands on. The mind meld, so called, made Spock “one” with the person or life form he was in contact with. Occasionally, however, Spock would try to link his mind to that of a superior being. The results were always disastrous, and our favorite Vulcan was generally thrown across the room or knocked unconscious for his efforts.

Isaiah tells us that a mind meld with God is something all saints learn. “With” God is something all saints learn.

We want this to be true of course. Like St. Paul, we want to feel so close, so connected, so faithful in our life as disciples of Jesus that we become synonymous with Jesus—really “Christian” as the word suggests. We want people to see us and be able to say, as they did of the early Church: “See how these Christians love one another!” We’d like to radiate goodness, as the portraits of the saints do, wearing their circlets of gold. We know we’ve arrived in our full identity as Christians when death appears to us merely as a deeper share in the journey of Jesus, as stunningly expressed in the hymn, “All Creatures of Our God and King”: “And you, most kind and gentle death…you lead to heaven the child of God where Christ our Lord the way has trod.”

Not all of us are there yet. For many of us, life is not entirely Christ, and death doesn’t get to do what he wants with his money. The landowner feels about the workers in the land.

The truth is, it’s not our job to feel how God feels about us. We’re not on par with what we mean by that word. We’re not sure we can approximate in our limited hearts what that blazing Sacred Heart of Jesus is experiencing.

We want God to reason and to act as we do, wearing their circlets of gold. We want to be thought of as fully Christian in perspective in a single day. We can get there from here.

» What spiritual tools help you to develop the skill of “thinking with God”?

SECOND READING
PHILIPPIANS 1:20–24, 27A
For me to live is Christ, and death is gain.

We’ll know we’re thinking with God for sure when this parable of the hired laborers makes perfect sense to us. At first hearing, it sounds way off base. Why should people get paid the same no matter how long they work? Would you or I work for a company in which the salary was the same for the slackers as well as the go-getters? Wouldn’t we be tempted to throw in our lot with the slackers?

God’s generosity, just like God’s mercy and justice and forgiveness, isn’t like ours. God’s love altogether, let’s say, is not on par with what we mean by that word. We know we’ve arrived in our full identity as Christians when death appears to us merely as a deeper share in the journey of Jesus, as stunningly expressed in the hymn, “All Creatures of Our God and King”: “And you, most kind and gentle death…you lead to heaven the child of God where Christ our Lord the way has trod.”

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» How much of you is Christ? What steps can you take to bring that identity closer?

SECOND READING
MATTHEW 20:1–16A
These last ones worked only an hour, and you have made them equal to us.”

“The beauty of sacrifice”

Happy Labor Day weekend! Anyone who has a job, however unsatisfying it may be, knows that working is generally preferable than the alternative. I’ve quit jobs I didn’t think I could stand a moment longer—only to spend the following days suffering the uncertain anguish of what happens next. Having a purpose to our work, paid or unpaid, is vital to our sense of well being, even if we’re financially secure enough not to require the income.

It has to make a difference that we got out of bed in the morning. We have to give of ourselves somewhere daily or the pool of self becomes stagnant and rank. Perhaps the definition of a human being fully alive must include the word “sacrifice.” Prophets, parents, and other heroes know that what means. Many in the teaching and healing professions, in social work and other service positions are well acquainted with the concept. We don’t just do our job to get paid; we do it to make our contribution. Dishes washed, prayers prayed, loving attention granted—it all counts.

» What have you given away today that made today worthwhile?

SECOND READING
ROMANS 12:1–2
Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

Look at the hands of old people who have such hands to show at the close of their days. They “gave at the office,” and then arrived home to give some more to their families. They gave to their neighbors and their parishes, to God and country. Their hands are not the only part of them that bears the scars of labor and effort. Joints ache, organs endure the damage of stressful decades, and memory holds the log of injuries to self-esteem and loyalty and justice. And if they had it to do again, they’d do it again, for love’s sake.

» Who has made a “living sacrifice” for you out of their own flesh and blood?

GOSSPEL
MATTHEW 16:21–27
“Whoever wishes to come after me must take up his cross and follow me.”

It doesn’t take a genius or guru to recognize that life is hard. But it does take a wise person to know the difference between responsibly shouldering your burdens and doing your best to duck out of them. I know a man who abandoned wife and children, quit working, and
devoted himself to drinking as a means of escaping the hard realities of life. At the end of his days, he admitted it didn’t work. Sorrow had dogged his steps every hour along the way, and he’d never been free of suffering, as he had wished.

It’s hard to love a cross. It’s unhealthy, in fact, to be in love with our pain. But we do have to make peace with what’s ours to carry. Our loved ones have needs we can’t meet. There are things money can’t buy. We face disappointments, betrayals, and crises thrown on the heap of our present troubles that often feel like the last straw that will bring our forbearance crashing down. To deny the hour of sacrifice and suffering is to risk being “Satan,” the liar and denier of Jesus. The cross is where we learn the true cost of love.

> Who taught you the most about responsibly bearing a burden?

Most of us don’t use the words “love” and “law” in the same sentence. We think of love as a soft emotion that is often moved toward compassion and letting people off the hook. Law, on the other hand, is a hard cold logical framework for establishing and enforcing certain behaviors. Laying down the law sounds like the precise opposite to being loved. Yet St. Paul calls love the fulfillment of law, which can be deeply confusing. It helps to know that law, in Hebrew, means benevolent guidance. In the Ten Commandments, God doesn’t lay down the law like an anvil on our heads. God gives us a lamp to light our path so we don’t stumble and do some real damage to ourselves. So law is love, in a biblical sense. To keep the law completely is to find ourselves transformed into perfectly loving beings. Obeying divine law means we’re in right relationship with God and our neighbor. And let’s remember that Jesus defines neighbor broadly, to include the enemy. This kind of love fulfills the greatest law there is: “Love one another as Jesus loves us.”

> How do laws—civil, religious, personal—make you better at loving?

Very few of us enjoy being morality cops, telling our family and friends what they’re doing wrong and how they need to change. For one thing, most of us feel we’re in no position to judge others—which is absolutely true. For another, we dread embarrassing people we care about by telling them something they will not be glad to hear. Most spouses don’t even alert each other when they have a bit of a parsley in their teeth, much less when their faults are showing. To be sure, the correction talk must be handled delicately—and alone, as Jesus insists. We don’t come from a superior position but from love, which makes a big difference in how we come across. We only need to say a truth plainly and briefly. Then we leave room—for listening, or for silent reflection. When I’ve been on the receiving end of the correction talk, I’ve never said, “Thanks, what a help this has been!” At once. But after sitting with the truth for a while, I find a place for gratitude in the long run.

> When has someone told you a hard truth about yourself? How long did it take to transform you?

Those who live by the sword die by the sword.” An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” “We all get what we deserve.” These sayings are about the curious matter of reciprocity, which most of us either want or fear. Reciprocity is like karma: the Eastern idea that people shape their fate in the next life based on the forces they generate in this life. Many of us are at home with a more instant version of karma: if we do a rotten thing to someone, we expect to pay for that sooner rather than later. The writer of Sirach, wisdom teacher Ben Sira of the century before Jesus, was onto something when he saw forgiveness coming to those who forgive, and pardon available to those who show mercy. On the other hand, if the outgoing expression of love and justice built into the universe; they’re as close as the chemistry in our bodies generated by our acts of kindness, or deeds of darkness.

> How do you feel when you do a generous thing? How does brooding and rehearsing injuries you’ve suffered feel?

How much time is enough time to give in service to God? Some of us tithe an hour a week in worship and check off a spiritual box. Others add in daily Mass, prayers, maybe a rosary now and then. The observant Jew is obliged to do one act of anonymous kindness every day. But is he or she off the clock of moral obligation after the act is done? Do any of us dare to take a vacation from being the good guy after five p.m. or so? Or do we label the other person the bill payer, and “dole some out by the hour.” The story continues to sound fantastic, though we’ve heard it many times. A servant is forgiven a sum so astronomical he could never have paid it back. Yet this same servant throws his own debtor in prison for pennies, comparatively. What kind of whacked out standard was this guy living by? Why wasn’t he consumed by his own good fortune enough to share a little of the joy with a fellow servant? And then it hits us like a two-by-four. Oh. This isn’t a tale of unbelievable smallness of heart. It’s how you and I behave every day. Jesus goes to the cross to demonstrate the absolute forgiveness of the entire debt of human history. And we respond by gross irritation at every trifling offense we perceive against us. Someone takes our parking place, gets our order wrong, cuts us off in conversation, and we’re ready to erase them from the book of life. If we begin each day reminding ourselves how wealthy in forgiveness we are, we might dole some out by the hour.

> In which circumstances do you find yourself routinely treating someone poorly? What does it take to return you to the spirit of charity?
SEPTEMBER 2017

LECTIOARY 13A
TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING
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So high are my ways above your ways, and my thoughts above your thoughts.

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Isaiah tells us that a mind meld with God is something all saints learn to do—and we’re all saints in training.

“They know how these Christians love one another!” We’d like to radiate those thoughts for loftier ones. Thinking “like” God is something all saints learn to do, wearing their circlets of gold. We know we’ve arrived in our full identity when we are no longer programmed to want what we want and do with the same logic. This truth is not our job to feel how the landowner feels about the workers in his vineyard. What we are obliged to do is respect the bottom line: that the owner gets to do what he wants with his money. God’s freedom to be God is so often a point of contention with us mortals. We want God to reason and to act as we do, wearing our circlets of gold. But thinking “with” God may be impossible. But thinking “with” God is something all saints learn to do—and we’re all saints in training.

“With” God is something all saints learn to do—and we’re all saints in training.

SECOND READING
PHILIPPIANS 1:20–24, 27A
For to me life is Christ, and death is gain.

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LECTIOARY 13B
TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING
ROSEMARIE TIERNEY
Jeremiah 3:17–24
But then it becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones.

Happy Labor Day weekend! Anyone who has a job, however unsatisfying it may be, knows that working is generally preferable than the alternative. I’ve quit jobs I didn’t think I could stand a moment longer—only to spend the following days suffering the uncertain anguish of what happens next. Having a purpose for our days, paid or unpaid, is vital to our sense of well being, even if we’re financially secure enough not to require the income. It makes a difference that we get out of bed in the morning. We have to give something of ourselves away daily or the pool of self becomes stagnant and rank.

Perhaps the definition of a human being fully alive must include the word “sacrifice.” Prophets, parents, and other heroes know that what means. Many in the teaching and healing professions, in social work and other service positions are well acquainted with the concept. We don’t just do our job to get paid; we do it to make our contribution. Dishes washed, prayers prayed, loving attention granted—it all counts.

What have you given away today that made today worthwhile?

SECOND READING
ROMANS 12:1–2
Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

Look at the hands of old people who’ve done hard labor as farmers or coal miners, mothers or factory workers. The fingers may be bent or gnarled, or even missing. The skin isn’t like anything you see in a cosmetic ad. Sun and dirt, detergent and repetitive motion have exacted their price. They speak volumes about families loved and provided for, responsibilities faithfully attended, sacrifices rendered.

I come from a long line of people who, heroes know what that means. Many in the teaching and healing professions, in social work and other service positions are well acquainted with the concept. We don’t just do our job to get paid; we do it to make our contribution. Dishes washed, prayers prayed, loving attention granted—it all counts.

Who has made a “living sacrifice” for you out of their own flesh and blood?

GOSPEL
MATTHEW 20:1–16A
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