

# exploring

## THE SUNDAY READINGS

YOUR GUIDE FOR THE MONTH OF SEPTEMBER 2017

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### OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, the work of human hands is a small thing in the depths of your creation. Still we ask your blessing on our labors, in the home and at school, in the work place and in the parish. May our every action be aligned with your will, for happiness is only possible when our hearts are attentive to yours. Through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

## September 3 | LECTIONARY 124A TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

# THE BEAUTY IN SACRIFICE

### FIRST READING

JEREMIAH 20:7-9

**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 to 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 has to make a difference that we got 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 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.

» *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. Yet such hands are incomparably beautiful. They speak volumes about families loved and provided for, responsibilities faithfully attended, sacrifices rendered.

I come from a long line of 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?*

### GOSPEL

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?*

## September 10 | LECTIONARY 127A TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME TURNING OURSELVES AROUND

### FIRST READING

EZEKIEL 33:7-9

**"If he refuses to turn from his way, he shall die, but you shall save yourself."**

Tomorrow, many of our fellow citizens will be remembering a tragedy and injustice that still burns brightly in our American consciousness. The world has never felt the same since 9/11. We became aware of our personal vulnerability like never before. We learned how possible it is that a few malevolent hearts can stop our country in its tracks.

Some of us were paralyzed by the terrible events of that day, and find it difficult to move forward even now. Some of us have resolved to turn that event around, and to turn ourselves around in response to it. We refused to become fearful, suspicious, angry, or bigoted. We insist on becoming larger souls, capable of greater courage, and seeking justice wherever violence speaks its vengeful word. As the prophet Ezekiel knew, telling the truth about wickedness is necessary, and it's a powerful act. Remaining silent in the face of injustice makes us participants in its legacy.

» *How do acts of violence impact you, and how do they change you or draw a response from you?*

### SECOND READING

ROMANS 13:8-10

**Love does no evil to the neighbor; love is the fulfillment of the law."**

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: to love one another as Jesus loves us.

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

### GOSPEL

MATTHEW 18:15-20

**"Go and tell your brother his fault between you and him alone."**

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 parsley in their teeth, must 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?*

## September 17 | LECTIONARY 130A TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME DOING UNTO OTHERS

### FIRST READING

SIRACH 27:30—28:7

**The vengeful will suffer the LORD's vengeance.**

"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

### SECOND READING

ROMANS 14:7-9

**If we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord.**

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

### GOSPEL

MATTHEW 18:21-35

**"Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?"**

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 prepared to "make someone pay"? What does it take to return you to the spirit of charity?*

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.**

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 to our neighbor is anger, we can't expect healing and peace to be coming our way. These aren't just mysterious formulas of 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?*

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?

Katharine Drexel, the millionaire nun from Philadelphia, once said, "I owe every moment of my time to God." Mother Katharine sought to offer every hour of the 96 years of her life—not to mention her total fourteen-million-dollar inheritance—to the service of God by making education available to neglected black and Native American communities. Most of us won't do what Drexel did. But she sets the standard by which we might all find ourselves humbled.

» *Today is Catechetical Sunday. What can you do this week to support religious education as Drexel did, locally or globally?*

## MIND-MELDING WITH GOD

### FIRST READING

ISAIAH 55:6-9

**So high are my ways above your ways, 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 not in the cards for any of us. Most of us are content to file the God stuff we can’t comprehend in the “Mystery” pigeonhole: Trinity, Immaculate Conception, Virgin Birth, Incarnation, and Resurrection, among others. This doesn’t imply that God stuff is not worth thinking about. On the contrary: we should strive to “seek the Lord” and “forsake” our ways and thoughts for loftier ones. Thinking “like” God may be impossible. But thinking “with” God is something all saints learn to do—and we’re all saints in training.

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

### SECOND READING

PHILIPPIANS 1:20C-24, 27A

**For to me life is Christ, and death is gain.**

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 still seems like an incalculable loss. Paul himself didn’t get to that wonderful mature Christian perspective in a single day. We can get there from here.

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

### GOSPEL

MATTHEW 20:1-16A

**“These last ones worked only an hour, and you have made them equal to us.”**

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. I’m not sure we can approximate in our limited hearts what that blazing Sacred Heart of Jesus is experiencing. The truth is, it’s 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 would. Yet God’s thoughts, and God’s heart, remain much, much bigger.

» ***Name three things you would do differently if you were God. How does God’s sovereignty compel you to surrender the need to have things your way?***



### LET US PRAY...

Lord of our journeys, you walk with us in seasons of darkness and light, even through the valley of the shadow of death. Send your Spirit to guide us so that we can be closer companions to your will, always attentive to the sound of your voice in our days. We ask this through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

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