

SOLEMNITY OF THE MOST HOLY TRINITY

May 27, 2018 B

Opening prayer: *God of all ages, you are all loving, slow to anger and rich in kindness. We praise you for your goodness. You are the Creator and Sustainer of our lives. You are our Savior. We honor you for your total gift of self. You are the Spirit of life, forgiveness, and peace. We delight in your tender love. One God in three persons, be near to us who are formed in your image. Dwell in us. We ask this, gracious God, living and true, forever and ever. Amen.*

Sharing life: How did you experience God this past week?

Facilitator reads focus statement: The Monday after Pentecost Sunday, our Church liturgical calendar returns to Ordinary Time. The Sundays in Ordinary Time after Pentecost begin with two Solemnities, namely, the Most Holy Trinity and Corpus Christi. On this Sunday, as we honor the Holy Trinity, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “*The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith and the Christian life*” (Art.261). In the first reading, which is Moses’ farewell address to the Israelites, Moses speaks about the greatness of God and their obligations to follow his ways. In Jesus’ farewell address to his disciples, he commissions them to “make disciples of all nations.” In the second reading, Paul speaks about our spiritual adoption by God through Jesus.

Read the assigned Scripture readings, pausing briefly after each one. Consider going over the commentary after each reading, if you have not done so prior to your meeting.

FIRST READING: Deuteronomy 4:32-34, 39-40

The choice of the first reading from Deuteronomy sets up both a *comparison* and a *contrast* between Moses and Jesus. The book of Deuteronomy is presented as Moses’ farewell speech to the Israelites. After wandering in the wilderness for forty years, the Israelites, led by Moses, have come to the threshold of the Promised Land. Moses can look across the Jordan to the land which they, but not he, will enter. There, Moses once again takes on his greatest role as the spokesman for God who gives God’s Law to the people. The first time he had done this was at Mount Sinai when he delivered the Ten Commandments and all the laws contained in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. Now, on the Plains of Moab, Moses repeats the Law for their instruction. This is therefore the second time he gives the Law. (The word “Deuteronomy” means “Second Law.”) Thereafter, Moses ascends Mount Nebo where he dies.

This reading is filled with awe for the greatness of God. It is as if Moses could not get over the fact that God spoke to his people and delivered them from the slavery of Egypt. In response to God’s goodness to them, they must be diligent in following God’s ways. If they are obedient, they will prosper in the land that God is about to give them.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 33

This psalm highlights the privilege of the people who are called to respond to the goodness and justice of God.

SECOND READING: Romans 8:14-17

Paul speaks of the Christian’s relationship with God as one of spiritual adoption. It is as if God has legally adopted us as his sons and daughters. As such, we can address God as *Jesus* addressed him, i.e., with the familial title of “Abba,” which is translated Daddy or Papa. If we truly see God as our “Pop,” we should be able to go to him with the confidence of a child who truly believes that he/she is totally loved by his/her father. To be a child of God also implies a willingness to be taught and led, something that may not be easy for those of us who were raised to be self-sufficient and independent.

GOSPEL: Matthew 28:16-20

Just as Moses gave his people a farewell speech, Matthew presents us with Jesus’ farewell speech to his apostles. He commissions them to go and “*make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them*”—not the Law of Moses but rather “*all that I have commanded you.*” Matthew, writing mostly for Christians who were raised as Jews, presents Jesus as the new and greater Moses who gives them a new

and greater Law. The mention of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is a clear expression of the Trinity. They are distinct and equal persons in the One God.

The message ends with the assurance that Jesus will be with his Church at all times. Because of this divine guiding presence, the Church will never self-destruct. Though she will always be imperfect and in need of external reform and inner renewal due to the fact that the Church is made up of sinners, she will never be in need of *replacement*, as the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century believed.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What events, experiences and teachings have most shaped your understanding of God?
2. Which person of the Blessed Trinity do you relate to the most?
3. Instead of seeing ourselves as “beloved children” of God, many Catholics see themselves as “distant relatives.” Comment. What does it mean to you to be a child of God? To what extent have you shifted from seeing yourself as a “distant relative” to being a “child of God”?
4. The Great Commission of Jesus to us is to “make disciples” of all nations. How well or poorly does your parish act on this command of Jesus? How well or poorly do you act on it?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act or respond to today’s readings. One suggestion: As we approach this great solemnity, try to relate to all three Persons of the Trinity. In other words, pray to all three persons of the Trinity.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray that you can be free of all negative and unhelpful images of God. ©

Prayer to the Blessed Trinity

You, Eternal Trinity,
are a sea so deep
that the more I enter in,
the more I find;
and the more I find,
the more I seek of you;
for when the soul is satisfied in your abyss,
it is not satisfied,
but it ever continues to thirst for you,
Eternal Trinity,
desiring to behold you
with the light of your light.
As the heart desires
the springs of living water,
so does my soul desire
to leave the prison of this dark body
and to behold you in truth.
O how long shall your face
be hidden from my eyes?
O abyss, O eternal Godhead, O deep sea!
Clothe me with yourself, Eternal Trinity,
so that I may run this mortal life
with true obedience,
and with the light of your most holy faith.
Amen.

St. Catherine of Siena

Catechism link. For my article on the Trinity, visit our website www.ascensioncatholic.net (go to Fr. Tobin’s Writings, click on Catholic Catechism Topics, then scroll down to Lesson Three, *The Mystery of God*.)

SOLEMNITY OF THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

June 3, 2018 B

Opening prayer: Loving and nourishing God, we gather together to contemplate the great gift of the Holy Eucharist. Open our eyes to the holy presence of Jesus in our eucharistic celebrations, and now open our minds and hearts to the message you wish to convey to us in the Scriptures we are about to share. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sharing life: What are you most and least grateful for this past week?

Facilitator reads focus statement: The theme of covenant can be found in all three readings. The Exodus reading gives us a dramatic account of the ratification of the Sinai covenant between God and Israel. The second reading speaks about Jesus as the High Priest and Mediator of the New Covenant. In the Gospel, we listen to Mark's account of the institution of the Eucharist which took place during the Passover meal. Through his sacrifice on the cross, Jesus established a new covenant with all of humankind. A new rite—the Eucharist—was instituted, which would be a perpetual reminder of the intimate bond that now exists between God and his people. In the Eucharist, Jesus shares his life with us.

Read the assigned Scripture readings, pausing briefly after each one. Consider going over the commentary after each reading, if you have not done so prior to your meeting.

FIRST READING: Exodus 24:3-8

When people negotiate an agreement with one another, there are a variety of ways in which the agreement is sealed or ratified. In some cases, a person's word is sufficient. In other cases, the agreement is finalized with a handshake. Today, most serious agreements are sealed with the signing of legal documents in the presence of witnesses and a notary public.

We have a dramatic account of how Moses, representing his people, *sealed their Sinai covenant* with God. First, Moses recounts to the Israelites "*all the words and ordinances of the Lord.*" And the people with one voice respond: "*We will do everything that the Lord has told us.*" Then Moses writes down the words he has just spoken to the people and repeats them aloud. Once again the people say: "*All that the Lord has said we will hear and do.*" The writing down and repeated reading of the agreement emphasize the seriousness of the covenant that the people are entering into. With the terms having been clearly *stated and accepted*, the covenant is formally sealed with a blood ritual. Half of the animal's blood is poured upon the altar, which symbolizes God, and half is sprinkled on the people. God and people become "blood relatives." They share life and pledge fidelity to each other. Using blood in the sealing of the covenant is an affirmation of the people's acceptance to "take my life if I break this covenant."

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 116

This psalm is chosen for its eucharistic overtones of thanksgiving and its image of taking up a cup. In its original context, it was a prayer of thanksgiving for deliverance from a life-threatening situation.

SECOND READING: Hebrews 9:11-15

Like the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, Jesus, now our great High Priest, enters not an earthly sanctuary but a heavenly sanctuary to perform the rite of purification. Unlike the earthly priest who goes into the sanctuary again and again to make repeated atonement, Christ enters, once and for all, in a definitive act of reconciliation. In addition, the blood offered is not the blood of an animal, but the blood of Jesus which cleanses us from all sin.

GOSPEL: Mark 14:12-16, 22-26

Reflecting on today's Gospel, Fr. Terence Keegan writes:

The feast of Unleavened Bread lasted a full week, beginning with the day of preparation for Passover. All the preparations for the Passover meal, including the sacrifice of the lambs, had to be completed by sundown, the end of the Jewish day. That evening the Passover meal would be eaten. It was eaten every year as a remembrance of Israel's liberation from Egypt. This final Passover meal, eaten by Jesus and the Twelve, becomes a symbol of our liberation from every kind of bondage. Jesus is here sharing with his

disciples the full meaning of what he will accomplish on the cross.

In the Semitic understanding, the term “body” meant much more than the flesh as distinct from the blood. It meant the entire being, physical as well as mental. It referred to the whole person. What Jesus means by the words “this is my body” (Mark 14:22) is that his entire person is being given to nourish those who follow him.

The significance of the “blood,” however, is somewhat different. “Blood” is the bearer of life. Jesus will pour out his life on the cross so that all mankind can share that life. At the Last Supper, therefore, Jesus nourishes his followers with his entire being and enters into a New Covenant with them by allowing them to drink his very life. Jesus’ final comment is primarily an assurance to the disciples that the banquet to which he had invited them would continue beyond the climactic events of the next day.

Though Mark’s text states that Jesus died for “many,” the Church’s teaching is that Jesus died for all people.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you most? Why?
2. What helps you to be more engaged in the Mass and what hinders you?
3. How do you feel about how the Eucharist is celebrated in your parish? What is done well? What could be improved? Especially consider the following: hospitality, proclamation of the Word, homily, congregation’s singing, and reverence.
4. What can be said to people who find the Mass boring?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

This week, try to be more conscious of how you are or can be Eucharist (a lifegiver) for others.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for a deeper appreciation of the great gift the Eucharist is for you. Pray for Catholics who no longer come to Mass, then say together the following prayer. ©

SOUL OF CHRIST

Soul of Christ, sanctify me.
Body of Christ, heal me.
Blood of Christ, drench me.
Water from the side of Christ, wash me.
Passion of Christ, strengthen me.
O Good Jesus, hear me.
In your wounds, shelter me.
From turning away, keep me.
From the evil one, protect me.
At the hour of my death, call me.
Into your presence, lead me,
to praise you with all your saints
For ever and ever.
Amen.

St. Ignatius of Loyola

Catechism link. For my article on the Eucharist, visit our website www.ascensioncatholic.net (go to Fr. Tobin’s Writings, click on Catholic Catechism Topics, then scroll down to Lesson Fourteen, *Eucharist: Source & Summit of the Christian Life.*)

TENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

June 10, 2018 B

Opening prayer: *Good and gracious God, thank you for gathering us together for this time of sharing faith and fellowship. You created us out of love and for love, but we insisted on doing our will and not your will. In the fullness of time, you sent your Son, Jesus, to redeem us from our sinful ways. May this time of sharing your Word draw us closer to you. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: What are you most and least grateful for this week?

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first reading describes the consequences of Adam and Eve's sin of disobedience. The Gospel tells us that God's promise of salvation is fulfilled in Jesus, who overthrows Satan. In the second reading, Paul is sustained in his trials by the firm hope that God has a permanent dwelling prepared for us in heaven.

Read the assigned Scripture readings, pausing briefly after each one. Consider going over the commentary after each reading, if you have not done so prior to your meeting.

FIRST READING: Genesis 3:9-15

Adam and Eve's sin of disobedience has resulted in the following:

- *Rift in their relationship with God.* When God comes looking for Adam and Eve, they hide. In their sinful state, they become afraid of God. When we are fearful of God, we could say that the consequences of original sin are "eating at us."
- *Shame for their nakedness.* Prior to sinning, Adam and Eve were naked and unashamed. After disobeying God, their innocence is replaced by shame and disgrace.
- *Rift in their relationship between each other.* When questioned by God about their sin, Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the serpent. Rather than taking responsibility for their sin, they blame someone else. This is the first story of the 'blame-game' so familiar in our society.

The serpent is also punished for his role in seducing the woman: "*On your belly you shall crawl and dirt you shall eat all the days of your life.*"

The reading ends with what scholars call the *Protoevangelium* ("first good news"). The final verse indicates that there will be a big battle between the serpent's offspring and the woman's offspring. Ultimately, the woman's offspring will prevail. The early Church Fathers saw in this verse a reference to Mary and her offspring Jesus, who would defeat Satan. In the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mary has her foot on the head of Satan.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 13

The response to the verse of the psalm—"With the Lord, there is mercy and redemption"—echoes God's saving grace for Adam and Eve's descendants.

SECOND READING: 2Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Paul's words should encourage all of us who are experiencing some decay in our body. The strength of Paul's faith, especially in the Resurrection, prevents him from being discouraged by his weakening body.

While Paul's *outer* body or self is beaten from persecution, afflictions, and perhaps illness, his inner self continues to grow stronger. Paul's faith in the Resurrection includes the belief that our human body (our earthly tent) will be transformed in the future.

GOSPEL: Mark 3:20-35

This Gospel is an example of the literary technique known as the "Marcan sandwich." He begins a story, then interrupts the storyline with another story, and thereafter returns to the original story.

Jesus' family believes that he is "out of his mind." They are upset with him. His unpopularity with the religious leaders of the day is causing problems for them. Hence, they come to take him home and get him out of the public scene.

Sandwiched between the opening and final scenes, which also has to do with his family, there is a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees. They claim that his miraculous powers come from Satan. Jesus responds with two parables. First, he asks them

to ponder how a house divided against itself could possibly stand. The answer is that it could not. So the accusation that Jesus casts out unclean spirits through Beelzebul is clearly false; it would mean Satan's kingdom is ended. The scheming of the scribes is evidence enough that Satan's kingdom still flourishes.

The second parable is about a strong man being tied up and his house plundered. Applied to Jesus, this means that Jesus does in fact have power over Satan. It has been demonstrated already by the miracles in which Jesus freed others from unclean spirits through the power of God. Satan's kingdom, while not ended, is definitely on the road to failure through the work of Jesus.

The unforgivable sin. Is there an unforgivable sin? Jesus says that it is blasphemous and unforgivable to call the work of God evil and to accuse God's representative as an agent of Satan. But in truth, all sin is forgivable as long as the sinner is sincerely repentant. But sometimes people may become so consumed with darkness and evil that they have no desire to repent. In this part of today's Gospel, Jesus issues a stern warning against aligning ourselves with Satan.

The final part of today's Gospel raises two questions for Catholics: "Did Jesus have brothers and sisters?" and "Was Jesus rude to his mother?" Speaking to this, Margaret Nutting Ralph writes:

"The references to Jesus' 'brothers and sisters' do not conclusively answer the question of whether or not Jesus had full brothers and sisters, that is, siblings born of Mary, because the words brother and sister did not have that precise a meaning in Jesus' culture. The word brother could be referring to any of the following: brother, half-brother, stepbrother, cousin, or follower. Notice the passage doesn't say, 'Mary and her children....'"

Regarding what some perceive as Jesus being rude to his mother, scholars tell us that Jesus wanted to communicate that the bond among his disciples is closer and more important than the bond among blood relatives. The closest relative of Jesus is he/she who hears his Word and acts on it. No one did this better than Mary who is often called the "first disciple."

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you most? Why?
2. In Genesis 3, we can say 'the devil got into Eve's head.' How can the devil get into our heads and lie to us?
3. How can a strong inner self help us to cope with a diminishing body or outer self?
4. Why might family members or others see faithful disciples as being 'out of their minds'? Have you had this experience? If so, how can one cope with it?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Suggestion: Be aware of how Satan may want to get into your head and how to resist him.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for all who are under severe attack by Satan and for all in the deliverance ministry. Pray for all whose bodies are diminishing in strength.

ELEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

June 17, 2018 B

Opening prayer: *O Lord, let your Scriptures be my chaste delight. O Lord, perfect me and reveal those pages to me! See, your voice is my joy. Give me what I love. May the inner secrets of your words be laid open to me when I knock. This I beg by our Lord Jesus Christ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. These are the treasures I seek in your books.* (St. Augustine)

Sharing life: How did you experience God's presence in your life this past week?

Facilitator reads focus statement: In the first and third readings, Ezekiel and Jesus use agricultural images to speak of God's mysterious presence in our midst and how his plan to save his people happens in a quiet and often invisible way. In the second reading Paul expresses his strong desire to please the Lord in all things.

Read the assigned Scripture readings, pausing briefly after each one. Consider going over the commentary after each reading, if you have not done so prior to your meeting.

FIRST READING: Ezekiel 17:22-24

The prophet Ezekiel is seeking to give hope to the Israelites who are in exile, having lost their king, kingdom, and place of worship.

God promises to bring a new king from the house of David back into power. The "tender shoot" from the topmost branch of the cedar stands for a new king from the house of David. Jerusalem is the lofty mountain. The newly planted tree will bring forth many branches and bear much fruit (a reference to Israel's future greatness). Birds of every kind shall dwell beneath it (a reference to the security the people will experience when God restores Israel).

Then there is mention of a reversal of fortunes that God will bring about: "*Bring low the high tree, lift high the lowly tree.*" What is humbled can be exalted and what seems to triumph can be brought down. The presence and power of God at work in all these events are underlined in the final verse: "*As I, the Lord, have spoken, so will I do.*"

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 92

The image of the tree firmly planted and flourishing connects this Psalm to the first reading and the Gospel.

SECOND READING: 1 Corinthians 5:6-10

Paul compares his present 'bodily' existence with that which is to come, and for which he longs: "*I would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.*" After Paul became a 'soldier of

Christ,' his body took some hard knocks; hence, it is understandable why he would prefer to be 'at home with the Lord.' Whether in this world or in the world to come, Paul's only desire is to live in accord with God's will. The reading ends with a sobering reminder that all will stand before Christ to be judged according to how they lived their lives on earth.

GOSPEL: Mark 4:26-34

Chapter 4 of Mark's Gospel is a series of parables used by Jesus to teach his audience about the kingdom or reign of God which he is inaugurating.

Parables address two very different realities and use one to throw light on the deeper meaning of the other. Parables also force the hearers to stretch their imagination to make connections they usually would not make.

In the first parable, Jesus uses the mysterious nature of seed growing to speak about the mysterious growth of God's kingdom. A man sows seeds in the ground and then goes off to do other things. In the meantime, the seeds gradually grow to full maturity. In a similar way, the reign of God takes root, grows and produces in secret, and perhaps in unexpected places. Growth is always the result of God secretly working in the hearts of people.

The point of the mustard seed parable is that small beginnings produce great things. The full grown tree, providing a place for the birds of the sky, may be a reference to the universal nature of the Church. The final statement about Jesus "explaining things privately to the disciples" may be a reference to the

slowness of Jesus's disciples to understand his teaching.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse draws you, speaks to you? Why
2. Paul says that he would prefer to be away from his body and in heaven with the Lord. What can help us to become more detached from the passing things of this world? What, if anything, helps you?
3. In what ways have you "scattered seed"? Have you seen your efforts bear fruit?
4. In what ways have you benefited from the seed sowing of others?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's readings.
Suggestion: Become a sower of God's Word when opportunities present themselves.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for all teachers and preachers of God's Word and for all who have turned away from God and the Church.

THE NATIVITY OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

June 24, 2018 B

Opening prayer: *God, our Father, the voice of John the Baptist challenges us to repentance and points the way to Christ, the Lord. Open our ears to his message, and free our hearts to turn from sin and receive the life of the Gospel. We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: What are you most and least grateful for this week?

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first reading speaks of a special servant used by God, someone like John the Baptist. The second reading highlights John's role as the precursor of Christ. The Gospel recounts the naming of John the Baptist.

Read the assigned Scripture readings, pausing briefly after each one. Consider going over the commentary after each reading, if you have not done so prior to your meeting.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 49:1-6

In the book of Isaiah, there are four "Suffering Servant Song" passages that refer to a mysterious person. In the early Church, the servant was often identified with Jesus. For this feast, we can identify this servant-person with John the Baptist who is also a very special servant of God.

Like John the Baptist, this servant was called from the moment of his conception. The servant is set aside to carry out a special mission. He is endowed with an eloquence as piercing as a sharp-edged sword or a polished arrow. His being "concealed in the shadow of God's arm" may indicate divine protection.

The servant bears his soul with us when he says that he believes he has "toiled in vain." But God reassures him that his "reward or recompense is with God." With a deep sense that God is his strength, the servant believes that he will be used to restore Israel and bring light to the nations.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 139

These verses are a beautiful reflection on God as always being with us from the moment he knits us together in our mother's womb.

SECOND READING: Acts 13:22-26

This reading is a part of a larger speech in which Paul emphasizes all the interventions God undertook for Israel. The actions of Jesus are, of course, central to God's entire saving plan.

In these verses, Paul indicates how special David was to God: "*He was a man after God's own heart.*" Jesus, a descendent of David, is heralded by John the Baptist who preaches a "baptism of repentance." But John is only Jesus' precursor. He is not even worthy to untie Jesus' sandal straps. Paul concludes by saying that his message of salvation is meant for us.

GOSPEL: Luke 1:57-66, 80

The birth of John is seen as an act of mercy on the part of God since Elizabeth has been barren, and barrenness is considered a curse. The response to God's mercy is rejoicing on the part of the people, a favorite theme in Luke. As faithful Jews, John's parents have him circumcised. Then he is named—an event that causes wonder, since everyone anticipates that the child would be called Zechariah, after his father. But both parents insist that the name will be John. When Zechariah writes on the tablet that the child will be named John, his ability to speak is restored. He has now fulfilled the angel's command to call the infant, John, a name which means "God has shown favor."

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you most in the readings? Why?
2. Have you ever thought that you "toiled in vain" with your children or with other projects? What helped you to get through such times?
3. What do you make of the fact that David, an adulterer and murderer, is called a "man after God's own heart?" What might this say to us about God?

4. Share some of the circumstances of your birth, e.g., was it a tough pregnancy for your mother; where were you born; your first and last name, etc.

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

What is one way to act on today's readings?
Suggestion: Be more aware of how special you are in God's eyes and how he has called you to be his servant.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray that all those who are pregnant will deliver a healthy child. Pray that those considering an abortion at this time will choose life.

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 1, 2018 B

Opening prayer: *Jesus, thank you for gathering us together to share your Word. Open our minds and hearts to hear and understand your Word for us today. Help us to see your presence in the midst of sickness, suffering, destruction and death. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: What are you most and least grateful for this week?

Facilitator reads focus statement: The God of the living is a thread that holds together all three readings. Today's first reading tells us that God is the author of life. In the Gospel, Jesus gives life to a very sick woman and raises to life a young girl. In the second reading, we are reminded that our generosity is but a faint reflection of Christ's generosity towards us.

Read the assigned Scripture readings, pausing briefly after each one. Consider going over the commentary after each reading, if you have not done so prior to your meeting.

FIRST READING: Wisdom 1:13-15; 2:23-24

The opening verse: *"God did not make death, nor does he rejoice in the destruction of the living,"* is a perfect lead into today's Gospel which shows us Jesus' power over sickness and death. God is a God of wholeness.

The Wisdom author writing about one hundred years before Christ expresses belief in the immortality of humans: *"God created man to be imperishable."* The responsibility for death is laid at the feet of Satan and those who through their own free will choose to alienate themselves from God.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 30

The reference to God saving the afflicted from going down into the pit connects this psalm with our first and third readings.

SECOND READING: 2 Corinthians 8:7, 9, 13-15

Paul carries out the task of taking up a collection to help the poor of Jerusalem. He puts forth three reasons why the Corinthians should participate in the collection:

- They are abundantly blessed.
- Jesus has given them an excellent model of generosity: though rich, he became poor for our sake.
- Their sharing will bring about an equitable distribution of material goods among the Christian communities: *"Their abundance may be for your need."*

GOSPEL: Mark 5:21-43

In today's Gospel, Mark dovetails two stories that emphasizes Jesus' power to overcome sickness and death, and stresses the vital role of faith for all seeking redemption.

The hemorrhaging woman is deemed ritually unclean because of her condition. She cannot touch anyone inside or outside her home. She lives a very isolated life and is regarded an outcast. But upon hearing that the Healer is coming to town, she takes a huge risk and goes to meet him (probably with a covered face in case she is discovered). The woman expresses tremendous faith when she says: *"If only, I can touch the hem of his garment, I will be cured."* She does and is miraculously healed.

When Jesus asks: *"Who touched me?"* the woman is terrified that she will be punished for breaking the law that prohibits the ritually unclean from touching another. But she still finds the strength to come forward and confess all to Jesus. Rather than condemning her, Jesus publicly praises her for her faith: *"Daughter, your faith has saved you."*

In the second miracle story, Jesus shows his power over death. Notice how Jesus once again works this miracle in response to the powerful faith of the girl's father. Jesus' order not to tell anyone about what he has just done seems a bit ridiculous since there is a large crowd outside. At that time, the disciples would have thought that Jesus only healed a sick girl. But after he defeats death by his Resurrection, they will come to see that he truly has power over death.

Two other things to note about this Gospel:

First, in telling these stories, Mark highlights for his community the value of every human life, especially those considered outcasts in the eyes of society.

Second, Mark tells a persecuted community that Jesus is on their side and they must have faith that he will help them to get through these bad times, even if it means martyrdom.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you and why?
2. In the first reading, the wisdom writer says: “*The creatures of the world are wholesome, and there is not a destructive drug among them.*” What causes us to lose touch with our innate goodness and the innate goodness of others?
3. In the second reading, Paul gives the Corinthians three reasons why they should share with the poor (see commentary). Do you believe disciples have a responsibility to help out those in need? If yes, how do you seek to live out that belief?
4. Have you ever felt like an outcast? If so, what was that feeling like? What do you think it is like for the homeless, the mentally ill, and other outcasts of society?
5. How has death entered your life? What was that like?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today’s Scriptures. Suggestion: When the opportunity arises, show compassion for those whose social life involves visits to the doctor.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray especially for the sick and the dying and their caregivers, and for people living on the edge of society.©

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 8, 2018 B

Opening prayer: *God of yesterday, today and tomorrow, help us to be alert to the presence of your Spirit as we seek to discern your message for us in today's Word. Help us to recognize the true prophets in our midst and may we not be led astray by the false ones. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: How was your Fourth of July weekend? What do you love most about America?

Facilitator reads focus statement: A common thread running through all three readings this week is "opposition in ministry" or "rejection of the prophet."

Read the assigned Scripture readings, pausing briefly after each one. Consider going over the commentary after each reading, if you have not done so prior to your meeting.

FIRST READING: Ezekiel 2:2-5

The *call* and *commission* of Ezekiel are recounted in this brief reading: "*The spirit entered me and set me on my feet.*" The Spirit of God enables the prophet to stand tall. The Spirit will energize and empower Ezekiel to speak the word God places in his heart. The prophet is told that the Israelites, to whom he is being sent, are a rebellious people, hard to face, and obstinate of heart. Thus Ezekiel is being prepared for the resistance he will face when he delivers God's message. Even though the people will reject God's Word, they will know that a prophet has been in their midst. Ezekiel's role is to announce God's message. He is not responsible for Israel's lack of response.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 123

This psalm opens with a statement of trust in God. The last stanza expresses the sentiments of one under a lot of stress: Israel in exile or Ezekiel's feelings when his message is rejected.

SECOND READING: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

So many of the people we regard as great have had tremendous obstacles to overcome along their respective paths to greatness. John Milton was blind. Beethoven and Thomas Edison were deaf. Franklin D. Roosevelt was crippled. Abraham Lincoln failed in two businesses, had a nervous breakdown, was rejected from law school, and lost four jobs and eight elections before he became President.

Paul speaks about his own struggles. We cannot know for sure what he means by the phrases "thorn in the flesh" and "an angel of Satan to beat me." While Paul could have had some inner psychological weakness or physical problem, scholars tend to believe that "thorn in the flesh" is some *outer*

problem he encountered in his opponents and critics. Whatever the problem, Paul prays three times for the Lord to remove it (recall that Jesus prayed three times in Gethsemane for God to let his cup of suffering pass from him). We can presume Paul was reluctant to accept his "thorn in the flesh" not because he did not want to suffer, but because he saw it as an impediment to his ministry.

God's response to Paul is: "*My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.*" God wants to use Paul's crisis to keep him humble and dependent on God. Paul's supernatural visions and revelations could have led to spiritual pride. Gradually, Paul comes to see that he experiences divine power most when he is vulnerable, humble, and powerless before God. This experience leads Paul to boast or rejoice in his weakness or in the insults and hardships of his ministry because it is in those moments that he most of all experiences God's power, divine touch and sufficient grace.

GOSPEL: Mark 6:1-6

Just as Ezekiel and Paul experience opposition and rejection in their ministry, so does Jesus. This Gospel passage tells us that it is the "hometown people" who reject him. This is a story of those who knew Jesus the most but understood him the least. They "wrote him off." He is a "thorn in the flesh" to them. The hometown crowd could not believe that someone just like them could be the Messiah. Their small-mindedness, lack of openness, lack of faith, and their preconceived beliefs, are all an obstacle to Jesus working miracles in their midst. As with Ezekiel and Paul, Jesus continues to faithfully proclaim God's Word regardless of his rejection by the people. (The mention of Jesus' siblings could have been a reference to his cousins.)

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse, idea or image spoke to you most in the readings? Why?

2. All three readings speak directly or indirectly about people closing their minds and hearts to God's spokesperson. How and why does this happen? Has it happened in your life or with someone close to you? What causes us to close our minds to God's or his messenger's message?

3. How have you experienced God's power acting through your weakness? How might some weakness be a blessing in your life? Do you have an example?

4. In what ways have you experienced rejection? How do you handle rejection?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's Scriptures. Suggestion: Be faithful in your witness to Christ and his values even if no one seems to be listening or responding.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray especially for Christians experiencing rejection, scorn and persecution as they witness to Christian values.©

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 15, 2018 B

Opening prayer: *Lord Jesus, we gather in your name to listen to your Word. You have called us and commissioned us to be your agents in the world. Help us to be faithful witnesses no matter what the cost. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: Another way of asking the question: “What are you most and least grateful for this week” is: “What energized you the most and what drained life from you the most this week?”

Facilitator reads focus statement: This week’s readings are very much like last week’s. They speak about *call* and *mission* and how those called and commissioned may be rejected.

Read the assigned Scripture readings, pausing briefly after each one. Consider going over the commentary after each reading, if you have not do so prior to your meeting.

FIRST READING: Amos 7:12-15

Amos is a shepherd and a migrant worker in the southern Kingdom of Israel when God calls him to go to the northern Kingdom to preach the Word. He sets out and lands at Bethel, the King’s sanctuary. A man who minces no words, Amos roundly condemns the injustices and religious hypocrisy that are very prevalent in and around Bethel. His message is not one that the people would want to hear.

In today’s reading, we have the local pastor running Amos out of town: “*Off with you, visionary, flee to the land of Judah!*” Amaziah does not want this young upstart from the south coming to his parish and giving hell-fire-and-damnation sermons. He also assumes that Amos belongs to a group of false prophets who get paid for their ministry. So Amos lets Amaziah know that he belongs to no group of prophets. He was happy being a shepherd when God called him to go prophesy to those “Yankees” up north.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 85

This psalm, among other things, is a proclamation of peace. It describes what will happen when the people repent and turn back to God.

SECOND READING: Ephesians 1:3-14

This week, we begin to hear the first of six passages from Ephesians. The first is a beautiful hymn that may have been used in a baptismal liturgy. It explains how a Christian is “*blessed...chosen...destined...sealed*.” In Christ, we are called to become the loved children of God (vv 3-6). In Christ and through his blood, we have been forgiven and

redeemed (vv 7-10). In Christ, we have the hope of pledged inheritance.

GOSPEL: Mark 6:7-13

Just as Amos was sent to the people of northern Israel, “the Twelve” (representing the New Israel) are sent out two by two to replicate the work of Jesus, namely, to heal, teach and cast out demons. They are to travel light and believe that God will act through them, and they are to depend on the hospitality of others for food and lodging. If rejected (as Jesus was in last week’s Gospel), they are to “shake the dust off their feet”—a symbolic gesture which would have let the people know they were rejecting God’s Word. If welcomed, they should preach repentance. The passage ends on a joyful note: evil is conquered and the sick anointed and healed.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse, idea or image spoke to you most in the readings? Why?
2. It couldn’t have been easy for Amos to speak tough words to the elite of the northern Kingdom of Israel. What “puts the steel in your spine” when you must speak or act in a way you would prefer not?
3. Jesus tells us to travel light. As you travel through life, to what extent do you tend to hoard or let go of stuff, materially or psychologically?
4. The Twelve were probably surprised when they saw how Jesus acted through them to bring people to repentance, to heal, and to cast out demons. Can you recall an incident when you were surprised at how God used you to touch someone’s life?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's Scriptures. Suggestions: Try to imagine yourself this week as God's missionary or agent. You are blessed with his authority to touch lives. Walk through your house and see what stuff you can donate to your local thrift store.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for missionaries at home and abroad. Pray for the grace to see how God is calling *you* to be his witness right where you are.©

PRAYER FOR EVANGELIZATION

God of truth,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
hear our prayer for those
who do not know you
so that your name may be praised
among all peoples of the world.
Sustain and inspire your servants
who bring them the Gospel.
Bring fresh vigor to wavering faith;
sustain our faith when it is still fragile.
Renew our missionary zeal.
Make us witnesses to your goodness,
full of love, of strength, and of faith,
for your glory and for the salvation
of the world.
Amen.

Pope Paul IV

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 22, 2018 B

Opening prayer: *Good Shepherd, we are the people whom you have gathered beside restful waters so that we can listen to your Word and allow it to penetrate our minds, hearts and deeds. Bless our sharing today and keep us close to your heart. Amen.*

Sharing life: How did you experience God's presence this past week?

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first reading and the Gospel are one of *contrast*. In the first reading, the shepherds are condemned for their lack of care for their people. In the Gospel, Jesus shows himself to be a very caring Shepherd. The second reading speaks about Jesus' reconciling work.

Read the assigned Scripture readings, pausing briefly after each one. Consider going over the commentary after each reading, if you have not done so prior to your meeting.

FIRST READING: Jeremiah 23:1-6

This reading begins with a strong condemnation of the shepherds (read Kings) who have not cared for God's people. Not only have they not cared, they have also led them astray. The strong word of condemnation is followed by a promise of a new Shepherd who will show true concern for the people.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 23

This well-loved psalm speaks of the author's absolute trust in God to care for him.

SECOND READING: Ephesians 2:13-18

This reading describes the unifying effect of Christ's blood. The Gentiles "who once were far off have become near" (2:13). Lacking the covenant and therefore access to salvation, the Gentiles were without hope prior to Christ's sacrifice (2:11-12). But through the blood of Christ, both Jew and Gentile are made one (2:15). The walls that had separated them—the commandments and legal claims—are abolished, so that now both have access to God.

GOSPEL: Mark 6:30-34

This Gospel is one of *contrast* to the first reading. Here we are given the image of a Shepherd who truly cares for his people. First, he shows concern for his first-time missionaries who return exhausted. He tries to bring them away to a restful place where they can be renewed in spirit. Secondly, Jesus shows himself to be the Good Shepherd to the crowds by feeding them with his Word.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse, idea or image spoke to you most in the readings? Why?
2. Who are the leaders in society or church that Jeremiah might praise or condemn today? Why?
3. Our second reading is a beautiful statement on God's reconciling work in Jesus. Have you ever reconciled with someone you had a long-standing rift with? If so, what helped to bring about the reconciliation?
4. What refreshes you when you are exhausted? Where is your "out-of-the-way" place?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's Scriptures. Suggestions: Watch out for opportunities where you can shepherd hurting people this week. If you are at odds with someone, take one step to bring about reconciliation.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for government and Church leaders. Pray for those who do not know Jesus. Pray for the grace to reconcile life's hurts.©

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 29, 2018 B

Opening prayer: *God our Father, open our eyes to see your hand at work in the splendor of creation and in our daily lives. Touched by your hand, our world is holy. Help us to cherish and share the gifts and blessings that surround us. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: What are you most and least grateful for this week?

Facilitator reads focus statement: For the next five weeks, the Lectionary interrupts our reading from Mark's short Gospels and inserts Chapter 6 of John's Gospel which is Jesus' discourse on the Bread of Life. In addition to the miracle of the loaves and fishes, Chapter 6 of John gives us Jesus' long discourse, which spells out for us the meaning of the miracle. In his Bread of Life discourse, Jesus gradually reveals his true identity and invites us into a life of union with him. For the next four Sundays, the first readings are stories of extraordinary feedings obviously chosen to parallel Jesus' discourse on the Bread of Life. In the second reading, Paul speaks about preserving the unity in the Body of Christ.

Read the assigned Scripture readings, pausing briefly after each one. Consider going over the commentary after each reading, if you have not done so prior to your meeting.

FIRST READING: 2 Kings 4:42-44

An unnamed man brings to the shrine twenty barley loaves, representing the *first fruits* of the harvest. Normally, these would be offered to God in thanksgiving for the harvest. But in this case, the prophet Elisha orders that the bread be given to the one hundred starving men. The donor objects, thinking that twenty will not be nearly enough to feed a hundred men. The prophet Elisha insists that the bread will be enough, saying that is what God wants: *"Thus says the Lord."* Not only will there be enough bread but also leftovers, to stress the generosity of God. The key point in this story is the efficacy of the Word of God delivered through a "man of God."

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 145

This psalm is a celebration of the goodness of God who feeds us with good things.

SECOND READING: Ephesians 4:1-6

The unity within the Church is the central theme of this reading. This unity is grounded in our belonging to one Body of Christ and to one faith and one baptism. Paul names some relational virtues that would foster community harmony. Humility and gentleness would help keep a strong ego in check. Patience (which literally means long-tempered as opposed to short-tempered) and forbearance are two aspects of the same attitude or fruit of the Spirit.

GOSPEL: John 6:1-15

John's miracles are a *sign* pointing to a deeper reality, namely, the identity of Jesus. The miracle of the loaves and fishes (the only miracle that appears in all four Gospels) reveals to us One who feeds not only our belly hunger, but also our soul hunger. Jesus presents himself as the one who feeds our deepest needs. The miracle has strong eucharistic overtones, reminiscent of the Last Supper when Jesus *takes* bread, *blesses* it, and *distributes* it to them. John's Gospel does not have a story of Jesus instituting the Eucharist. Chapter 6 is John's teaching on the Eucharist.

The twelve baskets of leftovers stress the abundance that characterizes the Messianic era. The Gospel ends with the crowds misunderstanding the miracle or sign that Jesus has just worked. When the people see what a wonderful Wonder Worker Jesus is, they want to make him King who will drive out the Romans and take care of their material needs. Jesus wants them to see him as One who will nourish their souls' deepest needs without, of course, ignoring their other needs.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse, idea or image spoke to you most in the readings? Why?
2. Do we as a nation do enough to solve the problem of world hunger? Might God judge us harshly for spending so much money on the military and

weapons of war and so little on providing food and clean water for the millions of starving people in our global family? Why don't more parishioners bring gifts of food to our Sunday Food Pantry collection?

3. In the second reading, Paul names some relational virtues that would help to build unity and harmony in families and communities. Which of these virtues are you strong in and which are you weak in?

4. The boy in the Gospel shares his small food resource which becomes a big blessing for others. What gift do you need to share so that God can use it to bless others?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's Scriptures. Suggestion: Be conscious this week of people who are hungry in one way or another and feed them in whatever way you can.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for all the agencies that work to bring food and clean water to the poor. Remember especially your local agencies and ministries.©