

COUNT ON GOD'S MERCY

FIRST READING

SIRACH 35:12–14, 16–18

The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds; it does not rest till it reaches its goal, nor will it withdraw till the Most High responds.

On my way to work I used to pass a man who held out a Styrofoam cup. Whether I was feeling generous or peevish about “panhandlers” on a given day didn’t change his response. He always smiled and promised to pray for me. I hope he was more regular in keeping his promise than I was in my generosity. Because Scripture says God really listens to the prayers of a fellow like that.

Is it bad to encourage begging? Doesn’t it destroy their initiative, weaken society, promote alcoholism and drug use? I remember what Dorothy Day, who knew poverty more intimately than I ever hope to, used to say: It’s not our job to judge between “the deserving and the undeserving poor.” Jesus told us not to judge but to share. For every quarter I’ve withheld from a person who asked, I ask for forgiveness. Because of every prayer a homeless man prayed for me, I hope for God’s mercy.

» **How many paths to justice—political, charitable, social, prayerful—are you willing to travel on behalf of the poor?**

SECOND READING

2 TIMOTHY 4:6–8, 16–18

At my first defense no one appeared on my behalf, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them!

Ask kids what makes for a good friend, and loyalty is one quality that will make the list. A friend is there for you, sticks up for you, never talks about you behind your back. Adults are just as clear on this, and yet we are not as good as children in expecting it of others or living up to it ourselves. The early church got used to betrayals: deliberate (Judas), inadvertent (Peter), and casual (the people who didn’t show up to defend Paul at his trial, according to this letter to Timothy). And the early church also got used to responding to these betrayals with the Jesus response: “Father, forgive them.” Jesus delivered this blanket amnesty from the cross, and Stephen cried out for his persecutor’s pardon while he was being stoned to death. Christian martyrs understood that the last and best act of a Christian was to forgive all enemies. Love is perfected when even enemies merit our forgiveness.

» **Which enemies are hardest to forgive? Which act of forgiveness, given or received, has taught you the most?**

GOSPEL

LUKE 18:9–14

“O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity—greedy, dishonest, adulterous—or even like this tax collector.”

I want to believe that I seldom pray the Pharisee’s prayer in today’s parable. But I’m afraid I often do. It’s the prayer of self-congratulation and self-affirmation. It’s also asking for God’s love and approval. Most of us grew up with rewards and punishments, and we’re still subject to the carrot-and-stick in the workplace. No wonder so many grown men still seek a cookie when they’ve been “good” and done their chores, or women go to the spa because they “deserve some pampering” at the end of a long week. Is it surprising that we want the same affirmation from God that we’re doing a good job keeping those commandments and following those rules?

But the truth is, we don’t have to seek God’s approval. We’re already loved beyond imagination, and forgiven beyond reason. All we have to do is what that humble tax collector does: admit that we are sinners. That won’t make God mad. It makes us eligible for God’s mercy.

» **Do you trust in the love and mercy of God? How do you share with others the wealth of forgiveness you receive?**

exploring

THE SUNDAY READINGS

YOUR GUIDE FOR THE MONTH OF OCTOBER 2007

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OPENING PRAYER

Let us pray... God of abundance, all we have and all we are is a gift from you. Help us to live gratefully and generously, day by day. In Jesus’ name we pray. *Amen.*

OCTOBER

7

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

LECTIONARY 141C

NEED MORE STUFF? OR THE RIGHT STUFF?

FIRST READING

HABAKKUK 1:2–3; 2:2–4

For the vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint; if it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, and will not be late.

“She has real vision.” “He’s such a visionary!” What do we mean when we speak about people this way? Part of “the vision thing” is an ability to see farther down the road than the rest of us. We also mean that someone has a sense of the Big Picture, and is not thinking in small categories or with limited focus. But the final ingredient in being visionary is a creative instinct for the future. A person with vision doesn’t see tomorrow as a rerun of today or a return to yesterday. Visionaries imagine what doesn’t yet exist and perhaps should. Theirs is a vital gift, and without visionary thinking hope itself might come to a standstill.

Leaders without vision, by comparison, can only take us where history has been before. The ways of violence, aggression, and power mongering are old and tired avenues well worn by every nation. Like Habakkuk, we will look at misery and destruction many more times until we learn

to hold onto a holier vision—and move toward its fulfillment.

» *Which modern leaders and thinkers would you describe as visionary? How can you personally nurture a new and prophetic way of seeing?*



SECOND READING

2 TIMOTHY 1:6–8, 13–14

For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather of power and love and self-control.

What’s the number-one enemy of human happiness? Some would say hatred, prejudice, injustice, or greed. Those are

all good candidates. I would say “fear,” which inspires all of those and even worse evils. Fear can be personal, as in the anxiety about being disliked or disappointed for who you are, or in the anticipation of bad news. Or fear can be purely circumstantial, brought on because you find yourself in the minority racially, ethnically, politically, or otherwise. You may fear something as drastic as bodily harm, or the casual cruelty of being friendless and without moral support. Fear, if left unchecked, can make all of our decisions, determine our relationships, and direct the course of our whole lives.

Yet we know that fear is not the stuff of Christian living; love is. As 1 John 4:18 reminds us, “Perfect love casts out fear.” And 2 Timothy says that God doesn’t provide us with a cowardly spirit. That’s something we pick up on our own. When we discover that we’re living in fear, we have to pray for deliverance. Love is always the right star to guide us.

» **In which parts of your life does fear cause the most damage? How does your faith discourage anxiety?**

LET US PRAY... We give you thanks, gracious God, for the mercy you show to humanity throughout our history. We thank you most of all for the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, who walked our streets so that we might find a road that leads us home to you. *Amen.*

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GOSPEL

LUKE 17:5–10

“If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

When it comes to plants and trees, Jesus knows his stuff. I recently paid a fellow to come and pull up a mulberry tree that was taking over my front yard. He gave me an estimate that I found agreeable,

but hours later his crew of three were still chopping and digging and sweating. When they finally finished, the foreman came over to me and said, “I have never dug up a mulberry before; next time I’ll charge twice as much!” His crew had been tied up an entire day on a job he expected would last an hour.

I have a lot more respect for the feat in this parable after watching those men take out my tree. Uprooting the mulberry is only half the job Jesus says our faith can accomplish. Transplanting it

into the sea is the second part, which is even more unlikely. But the mulberries in our lives are subject to the power of God, whether they are obstacles hard to remove or goals practically impossible to achieve. A lot of faith is not what we need. Genuine faith, even in the smallest and humblest form, is plenty.

» **Which is harder for you:** *to uproot present spiritual obstacles or to plant new spiritual goals?*

live outside the town. Lepers had to call out to inform passersby that they were near whenever they heard footsteps. They could beg, but only at a distance. Their only hope for restoration was for the ailment, whatever it was, to subside. Chronic conditions sentenced the leper

to the wilderness for life. When Jesus restored lepers to wholeness, he also restored them to the human race. Only one perceived that genuine restoration includes reconciliation with God and gave the proper thanks.

» **Who are our modern “lepers”** *in need of being restored to wholeness physically, socially, or spiritually?*

OCTOBER

14

TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

LECTIONARY 144C

MAKE ROOM FOR GRATITUDE

FIRST READING

2 KINGS 5:14–17

“Please let me, your servant, have two mule-loads of earth, for I will no longer offer holocaust or sacrifice to any other god except to the Lord.”

Why do we collect souvenirs? Most of the time, they are just dust catchers. Yet we all know folks who collect spoons, bells, mugs, tee shirts, mouse pads, ball caps, or bolero ties everywhere they go. When I visited the Sea of Galilee, on the shore where Saint Peter supposedly launched his boat, someone was selling key chains that looked like fish. When does the impulse to hang onto an experience clearly step out of bounds?

Mostly, when I find myself someplace that has special meaning for me, I take a rock home to remind myself of the experience. So I have a certain sympathy for General Naaman’s request of Elisha to take two carts of dirt home from his time in Israel. Naaman came to this land a leper, and leaves a whole and free man. That’s an experience worth savoring. But Naaman’s not just after a souvenir: he wants soil from a holy land so he can offer thanks to the God of this territory. He’s being awfully literal in this request, of course. But in a world full of many gods, he wants to be sure he is thanking the right one.

» *How do you express gratitude for the wonders and joys you’ve experienced? Do you collect reasons to give thanks along with life’s souvenirs?*

SECOND READING

2 TIMOTHY 2:8–13

Such is my gospel, for which I am suffering, even to the point of chains, like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained.

How is a person supposed to give thanks in times of suffering? Nobody likes to be in pain. It would be a sign of poor mental health to be grateful for it. But it’s also unhealthy to allow suffering to make us bitter or to allow it to color our entire experience as uniformly bleak. While my friend was dying of cancer, he took care to fill every day with beautiful sights, memorable events, hopeful stories, and plenty of hysterical jokes. Cancer didn’t make these things less true or good. If anything, it made them all the more precious and necessary. Lighting a candle against the darkness is not just a motto for the Christophers; it’s a potent source of Christian evangelization. The world is watching what people of faith do and comparing it to what they say. If suffering changes everything—makes our creeds

less real or our faith less sincere—that is a denial of the hope we profess. The early Christians, put to the test, reminded each other of a trustworthy saying: “If we have died with him, we shall also live with him.” A reason to rejoice!

» **Whose example of courageous suffering has inspired you?** *Who looks to you for your example of how to believe in dark hours?*

GOSPEL

LUKE 17:11–19

Ten lepers stood at a distance from Jesus and raised their voices, saying, “Jesus, Master! Have pity on us!”

Leprosy is another word for loneliness. Today the term refers exclusively to Hansen’s disease, which is pity-inspiring in its symptoms and also, gratefully, treatable and less common worldwide. In ancient times, any number of ailments could be intended by the term, including smallpox, psoriasis, boils, certain forms of diabetes, and Hansen’s disease itself. Any illness that produced rashes or skin abnormalities was automatically suspect.

But the primary definition of leprosy was the isolation it produced. Frightened communities insisted that lepers

OCTOBER

21

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

LECTIONARY 147C

HANG IN THERE!

FIRST READING

EXODUS 17:8–13

Aaron and Hur supported Moses’ hands, one on one side and one on the other, so that his hands remained steady till sunset.

How spry do you need to be in order to be a leader? Most of us presume that a mixture of youthful vigor and the wisdom born of experience is optimum for such high-level engagement. That’s why our presidents can’t be fresh out of college, nor can our cardinals vote in church matters after age eighty. But sometimes, age has little to do with how leaders are chosen. Moses died at 120 after forty years of leading Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land. Do the math. That made him EIGHTY when he haggled with Pharaoh to let these people go. That means, during the battle against Amalek in today’s reading, Moses was probably an octogenarian. Though too old to fight, Moses is hardly on the sidelines of the war. He determines to pray Israel’s army into victory by holding the staff of God over the battlefield. This is a nice idea, but those old arms are tired, and Moses just can’t keep them up all day. So his brother Aaron and friend Hur add their elderly resolve to his. Together, these three old guys win the war!

» **When do you seek the help of your family or community to support you in your goals?**

SECOND READING

2 TIMOTHY 3:14–4:2

Remain faithful to what you have learned and believed, because you know from whom you learned it.

Staying faithful isn’t easy in a world full of options. It would be more convenient to switch allegiances when your team is losing, to move to a new city when your life is boring, or to change spouses when the original is worse for wear. The trouble with restlessness is that it’s often YOU that’s the problem, and you can’t get away from yourself so easily. Fidelity has lots of lessons to teach, one valuable one being self-knowledge.

In matters of faith, often when we feel we’re not getting anywhere in the same old church, it’s really our approach that needs to change. Maybe our prayer routine has to be refreshed, or the understanding of our religion needs a season of back-to-school commitment. A weekend at a retreat center may challenge us in vital ways, or joining an ongoing Bible study, faith-sharing group, or service activity will give us new encouragement to develop as disciples. Remaining faithful shouldn’t feel like stagnation. Rooted in familiar soil, we can still grow in astonishing new directions.

» *“Something old, something new” isn’t just advice for brides. What’s old in your faith experience, and what’s new?*

GOSPEL

LUKE 18:1–8

“A widow in that town used to come to the judge and say, ‘Render a just decision for me against my adversary.’”

Have you ever wanted something really badly? So badly that you were willing to do whatever it takes to reach the object of your desire? It’s the sort of energy and zeal we normally assign to youth and to people in love. The rest of us can hardly summon up the commitment to order pizza most nights. What makes us so passive to life—even to the things we used to feel quite passionate about? The passage of the years is part of it: we gradually become numb to events that used to move us when they were freshly inspiring or horrifying. According to sociologists, television is also to blame: it’s a medium that invites us to take a seat and become watchers instead of actors in our destiny. But disappointment, too, plays a role in making us less engaged in later life. Our early enthusiasm often met with frustration, and we may become jaded about holding ideals too closely to heart. Some things, however, deserve our fervor and our abiding commitment. We must never lose our passion for justice, because that is God’s great passion, too.

» *Which ideals still rouse your heart and propel you to respond? How do you answer the persistent cry of the poor for justice?*