

TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 14, 2011 Cycle A

Opening prayer: *God of all creation, in your Word today you tell us that all people are invited to your house of worship. There are no outsiders with you. Open our hearts to a spirit of hospitality to all people of good will. Breathe your Holy Spirit upon us as we gather to share life and your Word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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

Facilitator reads focus statement: We live in a world, and unfortunately in a church, where some are regarded as “insiders” and others regarded as “outsiders.” All three readings today remind us of the *universality* and *inclusiveness* of God’s love—all are invited to sit at God’s table.

If you have not read the commentary before your gathering, consider reading it before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 56:1, 6-7

This reading speaks of God’s love for all people and not just his chosen people. As Isaiah writes these words during the post-exilic period of Israel’s history, there are lots of foreigners living in Israel. Many Jewish, including the leaders, consider such people as outsiders and are very resistant to allowing them to join their worship services even though they are willing to accept the God of Israel and follow his ways. Isaiah challenges such a parochial and narrow mentality. Isaiah states that if non-Jews “love the name of the Lord, become his servants, observe Sabbath, hold to God’s covenant,” then they must be welcomed into God’s house of prayer for “God’s house is for *all* peoples.”

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 67

This hymn of praise may have been written in thanksgiving for a plentiful harvest. It is chosen today because of its strong *universalistic* strain, thereby connecting it with the first and third readings.

SECOND READING: Romans 11:13-15, 29-32

These verses are a continuation of last week’s reading, which opened Paul’s discussion on the fate of Jews who rejected Jesus. Paul is hoping that the crowds of Gentiles joining the New Way will arouse so much envy in his fellow Jews that they will also accept Jesus and his message. Then Paul expresses his hope and profound desire that all who initially rejected Jesus will, at some time in the future, accept him. Like Isaiah and Jesus, Paul

wants *all* people to be included in God’s saving plan.

GOSPEL: Matthew 15:21-28

The biggest pastoral issue in the early church concerns attitudes toward the Gentiles, especially toward those who embrace Jesus and his New Way. In Jesus’ time, Gentiles are hated by Jews and seen as “good fuel for the fires of hell.”

Matthew has Jesus confine his mission “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But Jesus is also open to showing God’s mercy to non-Jews. We can feel the tension in the story as the Gentile woman refuses to go away. The disciples want Jesus to get rid of this “blathering woman” who keeps yelling at them as she searches for deliverance for her daughter from an evil spirit. The story even shows Jesus’ reluctance to deal with her. Worse still, Jesus calls the woman a “dog.” What’s going on here?

Some commentators try to get Jesus off the hook for his nasty remark but, perhaps, we need to accept the fact that Jesus, in this case, is acting like a normal first century Jew who called Gentiles “dogs.”

However, the real point of this story is not Jesus and his seeming rudeness, but the woman and her wonderful tenacity and faith. She was simply not going to be put off, even by rudeness. Fr. Dennis McBride notes: “*The Canaanite woman is the only person in the Gospel who has the wit to outwit Jesus. In the end, she gets what she was seeking.*”

The tenacity and persistence of the woman should be a source of inspiration to all people who are in any way oppressed and put down. The Canaanite woman lives in a male-dominated society. She is a foreigner who ventures alone into a Jewish milieu. When confronted by a distant, and should we say rude, Jesus, she does not “sulk.” Rather, she persists until she gets what she wants. She ends up, despite her background, being one of the most highly commended persons in the Gospel. Christ came for all. God really wants all at the table. Additionally, the woman’s wonderful faith in Jesus’ saving power is a central point of this story.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you most and why?
2. The first and third readings are about God’s *inclusiveness*. How inclusive are you? What kinds of individuals or groups would you prefer not to mix with?
3. Can you recall an experience when you had to fight hard to get something that was very important for you or for someone in your family?
4. Generally, what *is your* response to someone who begs from you? What *should be* your response?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on these readings. Suggestions: Look at how inclusive you are in your relationships. If you can improve in this area, begin to do so.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray especially for our Church that she may find creative ways to be more inclusive without watering down her teachings. ©

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 21, 2011 Cycle A

Opening prayer: *God of Creation, you have placed certain persons in roles of authority in our world, church and homes. Give these brothers and sisters wise and understanding hearts that they may guide us well. Breathe your Holy Spirit upon us as we gather to share life and your Word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: Who has been the best authority figure in your life? Why?

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first and third readings speak about the conferral of keys of authority. In the second reading, Paul bows down before the authority of God whose ways are inscrutable and full of wisdom.

If you have not read the commentary before your gathering, consider reading it before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 22:15, 19-23

In these verses, the prophet Isaiah is delivering God's judgment to a disgraced public official, Shebna, who has supported Israel's military alliance with one pagan nation (Egypt) against another (Assyria). The failed alliance is disastrous for Israel, which the prophet attributes to a failure to trust in the Lord alone. Shebna will therefore be removed from his position of trust and honor and a successor named. The Lord promises, "I will...give over to him your authority.... I will place the key of the House of David on Eliakim's shoulder" (Is 22:21, 22). The basis for conferring this symbolic key of power, of course, is Eliakim's perceived trust in the Lord God alone.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 138

In this hymn of thanksgiving, the Psalmist, unlike Shebna, places his confidence in God.

SECOND READING: Romans 11:33-36

The second reading is an acclamation of praise to God. Paul's hymn comes at the end of his discussion of Israel's place in God's plan of salvation in light of the Christ-event. Although Paul anguishes over the fact that many Jews have not accepted Christ, he asserts that their slowness to believe has led to the Gentile mission and, ultimately, Jews as well as Gentiles will receive God's mercy. When faced with the unexplainable, unfathomable and unexpected turn of events in human history as it pertains to Jews as well as Gentiles, Paul's only response is awe.

God's riches or fullness, his wisdom and knowledge, are the subject of verse 33. "God's riches" convey the sense of overflowing abundance of a God whose very being, whose love and fidelity, can neither be contained nor limited. As the Scripture attests, "God's ways" of doing things are often not "our ways." One can only respond with awe to God's mysterious ways. "God's knowledge and understanding" surpass all human designs. God's wisdom is something we receive as a gift from him.

GOSPEL: Matthew 16:13-20

In the Gospel, Jesus promises to confer "the keys to the kingdom of heaven" on Peter and his church (Matt 16:19). This extraordinary promise follows Peter's profession of faith in which he acknowledges Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Only here and one other place in the scriptures does Jesus use the term "church." From the context, it is clear that the authority given to Peter (symbolized by the conferral of the keys) is a gift to the community as well, not simply a personal charisma that will end with Peter's death. Peter's profession of faith is recognized as having its source in God, not Peter's personal greatness: "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you" (Matt 16:17). And the divine guarantee of power and authority is linked to the establishment of the church: "Upon this rock I will build my church" (16:18), and not just to Peter's personal ministry of leadership.

The terms "binding" and "loosing" refer to the Church's prerogative to grant or revoke

membership to people. The latter would mainly apply to unrepentant sinners.

We see from this reading, that the Primacy of Peter (which each of his successors holds) is not an invention of the Church. It is something granted by Christ himself. The failures of the popes throughout history do not contradict Jesus' promise that "the gates of hell would not prevail against the church." Peter himself fails the Lord. In giving authority and primacy to the one who will deny him, Jesus is communicating to us that his Church is not established on human strength, but on his own divine love and faithfulness. The Church's true foundation is Christ himself. The Pope is his servant, not his substitute.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse or image spoke to you most?
2. How would you personally answer Jesus if he asked you, "Who do you say that I am?"
3. How do you feel in general about Church authority when it comes to matters of faith and morals? Is the stance of the Church important for you? Or do you tend to follow your own inner sense of what is right or wrong?
4. What are some good uses and bad uses of authority? What one quality do you most look for in a leader?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on these readings. Suggestion: As each of us wields some authority in our homes and communities, spend time thinking about how you use your authority.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for Church and government leaders. Pray that they will always seek and do what is truthful and just. ©

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 28, 2011 Cycle A

Opening prayer: *Loving and challenging God, in today's readings, you place before us the challenge of carrying the cross so that we can become more like you. Help us to find meaning in the crosses of daily life. Breathe your Spirit upon us as we share life and your Word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: If you could be brilliant at one subject, what would it be?

Facilitator reads focus statement: Our first and third readings speak about the cost of faithfulness. The passion or sufferings of Jeremiah foreshadow the passion of Jesus, which he speaks about in the Gospel. In the second reading, Paul speaks about offering ourselves as a "living sacrifice" to God.

If you have not read the commentary before your gathering, consider reading it before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Jeremiah 20:7-9

In the Book of Jeremiah, we find five intensely autobiographical pieces often called the "confessions of Jeremiah" (11:18, 12:6, 15:10-21, 17:14-18, 18:18-23, 20:7-18). In these so-called "confessions," Jeremiah bares his heart to us, sharing with us the cost of discipleship and his struggle with God. They give us insight into Jeremiah's "dark night of the soul" (a phrase coined by the Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross, to speak about those times when one feels abandoned by God). The "confessions" also speak of Jeremiah's personal misgivings about his ability to be an effective messenger of God in the public forum. We are very fortunate to have this intensely personal sharing into the soul of one of Israel's greatest prophets.

During a turbulent time in Israel's history, Jeremiah is called by God to speak a message that his people do not want to hear. Jeremiah has to denounce corruption in the temple liturgy and condemn the people's dabbling in foreign cults, chastise them for their many breaches of the covenant, castigate them for ignoring the poor. Prophets are not known for their "feel good" messages.

Today's verses open with Jeremiah sharing with us that in his call, he is duped or seduced by God (see Jer. 1:4-6). He does not want the job but God, the stronger One, prevails.

As a sensitive and caring soul, Jeremiah does not enjoy being the "*object of laughter*" and having "*everyone mock him.*" But the people beat him up and throw him in a dark dungeon. Being a

messenger of God is no fun. On the contrary, it only brings him "*derision and reproach all day long.*" All of this leads Jeremiah to consider "early retirement." "*I say to myself, I will not speak in his name anymore.*" But the divine fire received at his call cannot be extinguished. For Jeremiah, the only thing worse than being God's prophet is saying "no" to God's call.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 63

This beautiful psalm expresses the author's intense longing to be in the presence of God. Most likely, this psalm expresses the thoughts and feelings of Jeremiah on his better days.

SECOND READING: Romans 12:1-2

Having spoken eloquently in chapters 1-8 on what God has done for us in Christ Jesus, Paul now in chapters 12-13 calls for a moral response. In acknowledgment of God's goodness, followers of Christ are to seek to make Christian values permeate every aspect of their lives. Authentic liturgy is not something that just takes place in church. Ideally, our *whole life is an act of worship to God*. Offering ourselves to God means conforming to his will and not to the temptations of the world.

GOSPEL: Matthew 16:21-27

Today's Gospel is a sequel to that of last week's with Peter once again as the main character. In last week's Gospel, Jesus praises Peter for recognizing him as the Messiah. This week, Jesus rebukes Peter for suggesting that he avoid the cross. Here, the

“rock” becomes “a stumbling block.” His remark to have Jesus avoid the cross puts him in a league with Satan. While Peter recognizes Jesus as the Messiah who is to bring about the new reign of God, he clearly has no idea, or maybe has a false idea, of how Jesus will exercise his mission as Messiah or accomplish the reign of God. Peter has yet to learn that Jesus will not be a regal warrior type of hero, but a humble, suffering Messiah.

Then Jesus goes on to speak about the cost and rewards of discipleship. The disciples must be willing to embrace the crosses of life and die to themselves, i.e., to their false self—proud, vain, self-seeking. Jesus, not oneself, must be the center of one’s life. In dying to the desires of the false self, we will discover and grow into our true self. The Gospel concludes with a reminder that ahead for each of us is a day of reckoning. Our words and deeds will have eternal consequences. Later in Matthew’s Gospel (25:31-46), believers will learn the criteria upon which judgment will be administered.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you most and why?
2. In the first reading, Jeremiah is very honest, even blunt with God. How easy or hard is it for you to tell God exactly how you feel?
3. In the second reading, Paul reminds us that our whole lives should be an act of worship of God. What does this mean to you? What small steps can be taken to make it happen?
4. Paul also exhorts us not to conform our lives to this present age. What are aspects of the present age that we should not yield to? How hard is it to be counter-cultured in our society?
5. Can you recall a time when you were pretty certain about something, only to find out that you were wrong? If so, what did you learn from the experience?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on these readings. Suggestion: Be aware of how you are or may be seduced into the ways of this present age. Seek concrete ways to resist such enticements.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for our Pope, Peter’s successor. Pray for the grace to allow God to seduce us into his service and for the grace to resist the many temptations we may have, in order to conform our lives to this present age. ©

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 4, 2011 A

Opening prayer: *Loving God, you created us for a relationship with you. When we stray from you, you call us back. When our brothers and sisters begin to follow a sinful lifestyle, you call us to help them see their erring ways. Give us the wisdom and courage to help each other to follow your ways. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: What gave you life this past week and what drained life from you?

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first and third readings address the issue of how to respond to someone in our church family community who is walking a sinful and wrong path. In the second reading, Paul tells us that in following the way of love, we fulfill the law.

If you have not read the commentary prior to the meeting, consider reading it either before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Ezekiel 33:7-9

Ezekiel was a prophet in Israel during the Babylonian Exile. The role of the prophet as “sentinel” is developed in this reading. The *sentinel*, stationed high atop the city wall, is responsible for alerting the people to any approaching threats to their well being. Once the *sentinel* has sounded a warning, the responsibility for action lies in the hands of the people. In a similar way, the prophet’s task is to warn the sinner of the impending disaster resulting from sin. Once the prophet speaks a word of warning, it is up to the sinner to listen to the word and act. If the prophet fails to issue the warning, then he will be held responsible for the disaster which befalls the sinner.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 95

The line “if today you hear my voice, harden not your heart” echoes the call to conversion issued in the first and third readings.

SECOND READING: Romans 13:8-10

Paul speaks to us about the centrality of love when it comes to following Christ and living a normal life. Christian love must be sincere, without hypocrisy and must manifest itself in heartfelt affection for one’s brothers and sisters in the community, even for one’s enemies or anyone in need. In the context of today’s readings, it can also be noted that genuine love sometimes calls us to reach out to an erring brother or sister with the purpose of drawing him or her back into God’s ways.

GOSPEL: Matthew 18:15-20

Chapter 18 of Matthew’s Gospel provides the fourth major discourse of Jesus, *the community discourse*. Jesus first insists that a childlike attitude is necessary for greatness in his kingdom (18:1-5). He also teaches the terrible fate of those who scandalize the “little ones” in the community (18:6-14).

In today’s Gospel, Jesus gives instructions on how the local community should deal with a member who sins. The whole purpose of the steps that he outlines is to win the sinner back from sinful ways by true repentance. The community must reflect the merciful love of Christ. It is important to note that this is a procedure entered into by the entire community, not just the leaders. Jesus suggests *three* steps: *first*, go to the person privately. This simple outreach may bring about the desired result. If the proposed first step fails, take along a second person to help the reconciliation effort *and* to emphasize the seriousness of the situation. If this still does not work, bring the sinner before the whole community. If he continues to be unrepentant, “treat him as you would a Gentile or tax collector,” i.e., as someone who has disdain for the Gospel.

Some scholars say Matthew is telling his audience to excommunicate the unrepentant sinner. Others think that Jesus wants us to treat the sinner with unconditional love because that is how Jesus treats Gentiles and tax collectors. Then Jesus says that the decision of the church will be honored by God since he inspires them in making the decision. Jesus ends

by saying that God will hear the prayer of those who gather together to pray in this kind of situation.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse, idea or image spoke to you most? Why?
2. When someone offends you, do you generally confront that person or do you tend to let it go?
3. Why is it difficult to confront someone? Have you, over the years, grown in your ability to deal openly with conflict? If so, what has helped you to grow in the skill of conflict resolution?
4. Do parishes and the church at large suffer because the leaders and members refuse to deal with conflict and wrongdoing?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on this Sunday's readings. Suggestions: If you need to confront someone about something, consider doing it. First pray and ask for the right words to say. Be loving yet direct in your approach and avoid words that are condemnatory. If someone you know is clearly on a wrong path, pray for the courage to confront that person.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for the grace to grow in your ability to confront and deal with wrongdoing in yourself or others. ©

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 11, 2011 A

Opening prayer: Merciful God, in today's readings you challenge us to forgive life's hurts and not hug them close to our heart. You forgive us over and over. Help us to offer the same forgiveness to others. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sharing life: Where were you on 9/11/2001? How has this event impacted our country and world?

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first and third readings build on last week's readings which dealt with how to handle disputes between individuals within the community. Both readings give us a strong message on forgiveness. If we are to be like God, we must forgive each other over and over. In the second reading, Paul addresses a dispute that existed between the Gentile and Jewish Christians.

If you have not read the commentary prior to the meeting, consider reading it either before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Sirach 27:30 -- 28:7

The reading begins with two proverbs. Then follows a strong statement about forgiveness. If we do not forgive one another, what right have we to ask God to forgive us? The refusal to forgive and our tendency to seek revenge are, in themselves, a manifestation of sin, warns Sirach. Those related to God by virtue of the covenant are the blessed recipients of his constant love and mercy. As brothers and sisters, covenanted to the same God, the people of Israel are called to manifest a similar love and mercy toward one another. To do less will be a breach of the covenant.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 103

This psalm is a meditation on the merciful face of God, which the Israelites have come to know so well through their history of sin and forgiveness.

SECOND READING: Romans 14:7-9

In these three verses, Paul states that the leadership of Jesus extends to both the living and the deceased Christians. Jesus acquires this sovereignty because he himself experiences the reality of both life and death.

GOSPEL: Matthew 18:21-35

The story opens with Peter seeking to put limits on forgiveness. Jesus tells Peter: God does not put limits on how often he forgives; neither must you put limits on how often you forgive others. Jesus tells us a parable to reinforce his point and to show how forgiveness freely given can be lost if not

freely shared. The King in the story is God and we are the servants. In failing to imitate his Master, the servant is severely judged and reprimanded. He is called a "wicked servant." The story is a "Kingdom parable"—God is like a King who expects his servants to offer each other the same mercy that he has shown them. To experience the reign of God is to experience the mercy of God in such a powerful way that we are, in turn, able to extend to others the same mercy God has given to us. The parable grounds forgiveness in the nature of God. We are to hear the parable's conclusion in accordance with its intent: it solemnly warns us that we must fervently pray for strength to resist the temptation of getting even with those who have hurt us and pray for the grace to reflect the majestic generosity of the Kingdom of God.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What verse or image in the readings spoke to you most? Why?
2. What are the obstacles to forgiving others? Name as many obstacles as possible, e.g., pride, the belief that someone doesn't deserve mercy, etc. Then name the primary obstacle that you may face in forgiving a hurt.
3. What helps you to forgive life's hurts? What might help you to overcome whatever you named as the primary obstacle to forgiving life's hurts?
4. In the second reading, Paul addresses two parties engaged in a bickering battle over dietary laws. Can you name some issues Christians or Catholics

bicker about today? How can these disputes be resolved? What advice might Paul give us?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on this Sunday's readings. Suggestion: If there is someone whom you have not forgiven, begin to pray for that person and for the grace to forgive him/her.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Especially pray for all who have little or no desire to forgive those who have hurt them. ©

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 18, 2011 A

Opening Prayer: *Loving God, we gather together to share life and to seek your ways which are always beyond what we can understand. May your Holy Spirit breathe upon us as we reflect on the word you place before us today. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: If you could be brilliant at one subject, what would it be?

Facilitator reads focus statement: In the first reading, we are told that “God’s ways are not our ways.” In the Gospel, we have a concrete example of this truth as we see how the latecomer to the vineyard is treated. In the second reading, Paul speaks of his desire to have Christ exalted in him.

If you have not read the commentary prior to the meeting, consider reading it either before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 55:6-9

This reading issued to the Israelite exiles in Babylon is a call to worship, a call to conversion, and a call to believe in God’s ways. The reading begins with an exhortation to “seek the Lord, while he may be found ... and while he is still near.” We can assume that the author doesn’t literally believe that God is moving soon to a distant place where he cannot be found. God can always be found and he is *always* near, but our dulled hearts may not recognize his presence. Perhaps the writer is saying, “Seek God while you have some spiritual sense in you. Seek him before you lose all belief in him.” Then the writer issues a call to the sinner to turn from his sinful ways. The reading concludes with a reference to God’s mysterious ways. In general, this verse is a reminder to us that we do not understand the ways of God in our lives or world. But in the context of today’s Gospel where a latecomer receives the same wages as the one who works all day, the saying is probably a reference to God’s great mercy. Despite the fact that we may have been huge sinners and spent most of our lives in a state of indifference to God, he will have mercy on us if we turn from our sinful ways. This way of acting is probably unlike how we would behave if we were God.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 145

This is a psalm of praise to God for his mercy.

SECOND READING: Philippians 1:20-24, 27

This is an amazing reading. Paul is writing from prison and is not sure whether he will get out alive. But it doesn’t matter because for him “life is Christ

and death is gain.” If he gets out of prison, that’s okay, too; it will give him another opportunity to preach the Gospel. The bottom line for Paul is to serve Christ and his Gospel. He urges his readers to have the same attitude.

GOSPEL: Matthew 20:1-16

Eternal life is a gift, not something anyone *earns* by his own hard work. In order to drive home this truth, Jesus tells his disciples a parable that violates their sense of “earning.” It is probably because the parable violates our sense of “earning” that so many of us are resistant to this story.

In this parable, no one is lazy. The men are standing around only because no one has hired them. But once hired, they go to work and at the end of the day, receive the agreed wage. However, their sense of justice is upset when those who are hired later in the day are paid the same amount. They believe the late workers received more than they earned. The landowner is not unfair to the all-day workers; rather he is generous to the latecomers. Hence, the second to the last verse of today’s Gospel: “*Are you envious because I am generous?*” Envy on the part of the followers of Jesus is unwarranted since every gift of God completely comes from his generosity, and not from any individual’s ability or activity.

The parable may have had specific application to Matthew’s mostly Jewish audience who notice the influx of Gentiles into their Christian community. Why should the Gentiles (the latecomers) be accepted as equal to the Jews who have been faithful to their covenant with God for almost 2,000 years? Here again their focus is on earning. But

earning has nothing to do with entry into the Kingdom. It is gift for all. We do not place God in our debt just because we have been faithful to him (more or less) for many years. We do not gain heaven with good works but rather by opening our hearts to God's saving grace. Whether we have served him from sunrise to sunset or enlisted for service only at the eleventh hour, God blesses us with his bounty not because we have *earned* his goodness, but because of who he is, namely, a God of mercy and compassion.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse or image spoke to you and why?
2. Can you name a concrete example of how God's ways are not our ways? What helps you to deal with God's strange ways?
3. Paul's attitude towards life and death is quite astounding. What might help us to get to a point where we too could say: "For me death is gain."?
4. Do you ever struggle with the whole issue of fairness in life, e.g., bad or irreligious people doing well and really good people experiencing a lot of pain and hardship?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's reading. Suggestions: Christ wishes to be exalted in and through your life. Be aware of this call this week and seek to let it happen. Also be aware of any attitude in you that makes you think you may be more deserving in God's eyes than other less faithful people.

The Weaver

*My life is but a weaving between my Lord and me.
I cannot choose the colors he worketh steadily.
Oft times He weaveth sorrow and I in foolish pride
Forget He sees the upper, and I, the underside.*

*Not till the loom is silent
and the shuttles cease to fly,
shall God unroll the canvas
and explain the reason why
the dark threads are as needful
in the Weaver's skillful hand
as the threads of gold and silver
in the pattern He has planned.*

(Author Unknown)

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 25, 2011 A

Opening prayer: *God of mercy, lead us on your path of goodness. Enlighten our minds so that we may come to know your truth, and guide our footsteps in the way of righteousness. Be with us as we gather to break open your holy Word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: Life has many seasons. How would you describe this season in your life?

Facilitator reads focus statement: In the first reading, Ezekiel tells us that each of us is responsible for his or her own conduct, and will be judged accordingly. In the second reading, Paul reminds the Philippians that self-seeking and rivalry have no place in the Christian community. In the Gospel, Jesus tells us that “actions speak louder than words.”

If you have not read the commentary prior to the meeting, consider reading it either before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Ezekiel 18:25-28

In this reading, Ezekiel tells his fellow exiles in Babylon that each individual will be held responsible for his/her individual sin. For the Israelites, this is a radical new teaching. Until now, they believe in what is called “corporate responsibility.” In Ezekiel, we read the ancient proverb: “*The fathers have eaten sour grapes and their children’s teeth are set on edge* (18:2). The idea of *corporate responsibility* meant that they are now paying for the sins of their ancestors. Hence the words, “*The Lord’s ways are not fair,*” found at the beginning of today’s reading. Ezekiel states clearly that we are responsible only for our own sins. If the sinner repents, he/she will experience a whole new beginning with God. Conversely, if the virtuous person sins, he will pay for his sins.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 25

This psalm speaks beautifully of God’s compassion for the sinner that turns to him. The note of conversion, as the Psalmist sees his own sins in the light of God’s goodness, makes this psalm a suitable accompaniment for the change of heart mentioned in the first and third readings.

SECOND READING: Philippians 2:1-11

While in prison, Paul hears from his visitors about the bickering and divisions occurring amongst his beloved Philippians. From the deepest recesses of his heart, he appeals to them to change their destructive ways. Because they have been baptized into Christ, they are called to live in a fellowship that should be characterized by love, humility,

mutual respect, altruism and unity. As their model for this transformation process, Paul holds up for his readers, Jesus. Look at Jesus: even though he is God, he is willing to surrender his equality with God in order to become fully human. He is willing to forgo his innocence to take on the sins of humanity. Because of his willingness to change, God fills him with his glory. In placing before them the self-emptying of Christ, Paul is suggesting to the Philippians a radical de-centering of their lives from self-absorption to self-giving.

GOSPEL: Matthew 21:28-32

This is the first of three consecutive parables in Matthew on the theme of judgment day and how we will be responsible for our poor choices. In each of the three stories, the result is predictable. The one who is faithful to the call will be rewarded, and the one who does not respond will be sorry.

Before we get to the choices in today’s parable, we should note that this story does name some key themes found in Matthew’s gospel:

- The importance of doing and not saying, “Not all who say to me, “*‘Lord, Lord’ will enter ... but only the one who does the will of my Father*” (7:21).
- Repentance. Neither son acts as he should, but the first son repents, changes his mind and fulfills his Father’s order. In today’s first reading, we see that God rewards repentance: “*If someone turns from the wickedness he has committed, and does what is right and just, he shall preserve his life*” (Ez. 18:27).

In today's Gospel, when Jesus asks the chief priests and elders which of the two sons did the Father's will, he is inviting them to pass judgment on themselves. The *first son* stands for sinners (tax collectors, prostitutes, etc.) who initially said "no" to God, but is now saying "yes" to Jesus. The *second son* represents Jesus' audience, the religious leaders of the Jewish people and recipients of God's revelation. They, or their ancestors, at one time said "yes" to God, but now they are saying "no" to him by their rejection of Jesus. The first group, in cooperation with the grace of God, is able to have a change of mind and thereby open their hearts to Jesus. The latter group refuses to have a change of mind and heart and is therefore shut out of the kingdom.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you most? Why?
2. In the first reading, the people say "*The Lord's way is not fair.*" Have you ever felt that, or at least wondered about his sense of fairness? How does God's sense of justice differ from ours?
3. In the second reading, Paul encourages us to "humbly look on others as more important than ourselves." How hard is this? How would such an attitude play out in the marketplace?
4. It seems that the Pharisees are giving a superficial "yes" to God. They say their prayers, go to the temple, keep the law, but at a deeper level, are saying "no" to God. They are rejecting his revelation in Jesus. Can this happen to us? It's a scary thought: a superficial "yes" covering a deeper "no."

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's readings. Suggestion: This week spend some time reflecting on the depth of your "yes" to Christ. Also, check to see how ready you are to accept responsibility for your mistakes and wrongdoings.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray that all of us will grow in our "yes" to God. ©

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

October 2, 2011 A

Opening prayer: *Lord Jesus, we gather in your name to share our lives and your Word. We thank you for this opportunity. Breathe your Spirit upon us so that we may know the message you have for each of us today. Amen.*

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

Facilitator reads focus question: The first and third readings present an image of Israel as a vineyard where God the Divine Planter and Cultivator has sown his seed, but unfortunately has failed miserably to produce a good harvest. In the second reading, Paul exhorts the Philippians to be prayerful and to constantly seek to do what is honorable, good and true.

If you have not read the commentary prior to the meeting, consider reading it either before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 5:1-7

Historical context: Isaiah is prophesying in Jerusalem prior to the destruction of the Northern Kingdom. Israel is God's vineyard which he transplanted from Egypt into the land of Canaan and carefully cared for and cultivated. There was nothing that he did not do for his vineyard. "*What more could I have done?*" Isaiah's listeners are compelled to admit that absolutely nothing has been wanting in God's dealings with them. The Planter and Cultivator of the vineyard naturally expects the vineyard to produce good fruit. But all it yields is "sour grapes"—bloodshed, oppression and infidelity.

God sowed choice grapes, but reaped stinking, rotted fruit.

God sowed peace, but got violence from his people.

God looked for true worship and got idolatry.

God sowed seeds of justice, but injustice grew up.

The message is clear. God has given all; Israel has yielded nothing. As a result, the owner is going to withdraw his protecting hand and Israel will be transplanted into exile, subjected to a drought, and given the opportunity to repent and make a new choice for God.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 80

The theme of the vineyard is continued in this psalm. The psalmist petitions God to watch his vineyard.

SECOND READING: Philippians 4:6-9

Paul addresses the "worry warts" in the Philippian community. In times of worry and anxiety, they are exhorted to turn to God in prayer and place their trust in him. In doing this, they will come to know the "peace that surpasses all understanding." Then Paul exhorts his readers to live lives patterned after Christ. Christian thinking and behavior will open them to the kind of peace that only God can give.

GOSPEL: Matthew 21:33-43

This is a story about a good and patient landlord and his wicked tenants, a story about God's dealings with his people. The landowner is God; the vineyard is Israel. The wicked tenants are the people of Israel but more especially, the religious leaders who were given charge of the vineyard by God. The servants are the prophets sent by God and so often rejected and killed. Despite Israel's rejection of his representative, God never gives up on Israel. He continues to reach out to her, even sending her his only Son. But still and all, she rejects God's Son.

As in last week's Gospel, this parable is intended as a warning to the religious leaders. Once again, they are offered a choice to accept or reject God's servant in their midst. Rejection will have dire consequences. But the warning goes unheeded. The tenants come to a bad end, Jerusalem is destroyed, and the Gentiles take the chosen people's place at God's table.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse, idea or image in the readings spoke to you most? Why?
2. What can the experience of gardening teach us about the spiritual life?
3. What helps you to cope in times of anxiety?
4. Paul also tells us that our thoughts should be directed toward all that is good. What helps you to “remain positive” about life?
5. The Gospel is a constant call to conversion. What causes you to resist God’s call to change and grow? And what helps you to say ‘yes’?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on this Sunday’s readings. Suggestion: This week, when you feel anxious, pray, “Sacred Heart of Jesus, I place my trust in thee.” Bear good fruit in the Lord’s vineyard.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for all who are workers in our church family—the Pope, bishops, priests and religious and laity. Pray that the Lord sends more workers into his vineyard. ©