

## EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 1, 2010 C

**Opening prayer:** *Loving and caring God, all riches come from your generous hands. You give them to us so that we can enjoy the good things of this world and generously share them with those who are less fortunate. May we now generously share ourselves with each other as we break open your Word in our midst. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

**Sharing life:** What do you like most and least about the season of summer?

**Facilitator reads focus statement:** The first and third readings speak about the fleeting nature of human life, especially of earthly riches. Paul complements this point by encouraging his readers to seek “the things that are above.”

If you have not read the commentary on the readings prior to the meeting, consider doing so after reading each one. *Pause* briefly at the end of each reading.

### FIRST READING: Ecclesiastes 1:2, 2:21-23

*Qoheleth* is not a proper name but a term for someone who convenes an assembly, such as a teacher. “*Vanity*,” repeated six times in the reading, means breath or vapor, but Qoheleth used that word to refer to things in life that were transient and therefore worthless and empty, e.g., riches, power, pleasures. Qoheleth (who did not know about the after-life) pointed out that upon death, all the things one had worked for so hard would evaporate into nothingness. The ancient sage frequently reminded his readers in this book to find meaning and purpose in the ordinary joys that God had given them in this life.

### RESPONSORIAL PSALM 90

As in the first reading, the psalmist speaks about the fleeting nature and transitoriness of human existence. The psalmist prays for the wisdom of heart that will enable people to live the few days they have committed to the things of God.

### SECOND READING: Colossians 3:1-5, 9-11

Our second reading is a strong exhortation to faithfully live out our baptism. Our new life in Christ, calls us to keep our focus on heavenly things, to cast aside all sinful things, and to be detached from earthly things. Because of our conversion to Christ, he must be the center of our lives. As Paul said elsewhere, in contrast to our relationship with Christ, all else is rubbish (Phil 3:8). In the final verse, Paul states that our new life in

Christ should lead us to banish all forms of discrimination from our hearts.

### GOSPEL: Luke 12:13-21

This Gospel reading is a part of a larger section which deals with the potential dangers of material riches for disciples of Jesus.

Someone asks Jesus to be the arbiter between himself and his brother. Jesus refuses to comment but uses the situation to give a strong warning about the danger of spending one’s life amassing material possessions. Jesus, a wisdom teacher, seeks to show the foolishness of using one’s energies to be rich in the eyes of people rather than to be rich in the eyes of God. The rich man is also foolish because he fails to place his trust in God. Jesus wants his disciples to be aware of the seductive nature of material wealth which can distract us from God, and to seek spiritual wealth which guarantees eternal life.

### FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you most and why?
2. In the first reading, the author seems pretty bored and wonders what life is all about. Complete this sentence: “For me, the purpose of life is \_\_\_\_.” To what extent does the way you spend your time and energy reflect your statement about life’s purpose?
3. How hard is it for you to live in this world while keeping “your eyes fixed on what is above”?

4. The Gospel is a severe warning on how attachment to material things may cause us to lose our soul. How do you keep in check whatever greedy tendencies you may have?

5. In your opinion, what percentage of your parish budget should be set aside to serve the needs of the poor? How does the poor factor in your budget?

### **RESPONDING TO THE WORD**

Name one way you can act on these readings. Suggestions: Repair a relationship that may have been strained by lies, greed or competition. Take time to reflect on your attitude towards material wealth.

### **CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION**

Pray for those suffering from bad weather and for protection from hurricanes and tornados. ©

## NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 8, 2010 C

**Opening prayer:** *Lord, in your Word today you place before us the faith of Abraham and Sarah. They placed their trust in you when it was difficult to do so. Help us to also place our trust in you. May your Holy Spirit breathe on us as we share life and share your Word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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

**Facilitator reads focus statement:** Alertness and vigilance connect the first reading and the Gospel. In the first reading, the author recalls *Passover night* when the Israelites in Egypt await their liberation from slavery. In the Gospel, Jesus teaches about the importance of an alert spirit. He tells his disciples to be like servants who eagerly await their master's return, ready to welcome him with a spirit of fidelity to duty, which should characterize their lives. In the second reading, the author recalls the faith of Abraham and Sarah and sees it as an unwavering confidence in God's promises.

If you have not read the commentary on the readings prior to the meeting, consider doing so after you read each one. *Pause* briefly at the end of each reading.

### FIRST READING: Wisdom 18:6-9

Chapters 11-19 of the Book of Wisdom reflect on the Exodus story and its meaning for the people of Israel. This reading recalls the night the Israelites are liberated and their enemies punished (a reference to the plagues which force Pharaoh to let the Israelites go free)—an event is foreseen by the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). As the children of Israel celebrate their liberation (a reference to the Passover meal), the adversaries of Israel are being punished (a reference to the tenth plague in which the first-born son of each Egyptian family is killed).

### RESPONSORIAL PSALM 33

The just one is exhorted to praise God for his creation. The note of elation and expectation connects the psalm with the first reading.

### SECOND READING: Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19

This Sunday we listen to the first of four readings from the book of Hebrews. These verses are an excerpt from a larger section which deals with faith, especially perseverance in faith. The author defines faith as the inner guarantee that God's promises regarding the future will come to pass. Also, faith helps us to believe that what is not visible does exist. Only such faith pleases God. Abraham and Sarah are presented as examples of such faith. Both believed in things not seen.

### GOSPEL: Luke 12:32-48

The first four verses of this reading come on the heels of the *Parable of the Rich Man* in which Jesus attacks not wealth, but greed. After assuring his "little flock" that the kingdom is theirs, he urges them to live like citizens of that realm, with simplicity, generosity and trust in God.

Then Jesus goes on to give a teaching on watchfulness and dutifulness. Watchful and dutiful servants will have a place at the heavenly banquet.

In the third part of the Gospel, Jesus responds to Peter's query with a parable that addresses different kinds of people charged with responsibility. Jesus shows how the managers or elders are expected to carry out their responsibilities while the master is away. In the parable, the first manager is conscientious in the care of others, while the second not only neglects his duties but is also abusive and self-indulgent. A "theology of mitigating circumstances" is thus introduced which suggests that culpability is not the same for all, that the measure of punishment will depend on the servant's awareness of his actions. Ignorance tempers divine judgment. The Gospel ends with the saying: "*much will be expected of those to whom much has been given.*"

### FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse or image spoke to you most in today's readings?

2. How would you define faith? Who is the most faith-filled person you know? Why?

3. The Gospel, among other things, speaks about responsible leadership. What are some essential ingredients of responsible leadership? What one thing could/would make you a better leader?

4. “Those to whom much has been given, much will be expected.” How does this saying speak to us as a nation, as a parish, and personally?

### **RESPONDING TO THE WORD**

Name one way you can act on these readings. Suggestion: Allow your faith to lead you to reach out to someone in need. Spend some time reflecting on the extent and quality of your stewardship. To what extent do you see all that you have as a gift from God? What might you presently possess that others may need (skill, knowledge, encouragement, material resources, etc.)?

### **CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION**

Pray for all who are experiencing faith struggles; all who are fearful; all placed in positions of authority.

©

# THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

August 15, 2010 C

**Opening prayer:** *Loving Father, thank you for gathering us together to prepare for the special feast of Mary. In your divine plan, she who bore your Son in her womb was raised body and soul in glory to be with him in heaven. May we follow Mary's example of obedient love and one day find ourselves joining her in heaven. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

**Sharing life:** What gives energy to your life and what drains energy from you?

**Facilitator reads focus statement:** When the feast of the Assumption of Mary into heaven falls on a Sunday, it replaces the Sunday in Ordinary Time that we normally celebrate on that day. The belief about Mary's Assumption has no direct witness in Sacred Scripture, but it has a long and strong claim in Christian tradition. The doctrine of the Assumption was defined as a dogma of the church in 1950. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes Mary's Assumption as "a singular participation in her Son's Resurrection and an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians" (#966). Mary has gone to where we hope to go and intercedes for us before the throne of God. Our Church would say that it was fitting that the body of her, who was free of all sin, including original sin, should not suffer decay. Hence, "when Mary's life here on earth was finished, she was taken body and soul into heavenly glory and exalted by the Lord, as the Queen of all things so that she might be more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of Lords and conqueror of sin and death" (Pope Pius XII, 1950).

If you have not read the commentary on the readings prior to the meeting, consider doing so after you read each one. *Pause* briefly at the end of each reading.

## FIRST READING: Revelation 11:19, 12:1-6, 10

The Book of Revelation was written to bring hope and consolation to a Christian community experiencing persecution for their faith in Jesus. *"Its exotic language and imagery were a deliberate attempt to hide from the uninitiated the full meaning of its teaching. The section read today starts with a vision of the Ark of the Covenant in heaven, and then shifts immediately to a woman "clothed with the sun." The ark, kept in the holy of holies of the Temple, had been lost when Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 BC. As a symbol of God's abiding presence, it is replaced here by the woman, who gives birth to a child who is acclaimed God's "Anointed One." The imagery of a dragon attempting to snatch the child at its birth is borrowed from the Greek myth of Apollo, pursued by Python but rescued by Zeus. For the Roman authorities persecuting the Christian community, these visions are no more remarkable than their own myths of the gods. For the Christian reader, this was a coded tale of God's ultimate triumph over the demonic forces at work in the world, especially the forces of the Roman state that were persecuting the Christian community. The woman in labor may be Israel, giving birth to the Messiah, or perhaps Mary, the Messiah's physical mother, or even Holy Mother*

*Church, giving birth to offspring that form the Body of Christ. (Foundations in the Faith, Cycle C)*

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM 45

The responsorial psalm, originally composed for a royal wedding, becomes in the context of today's liturgy, a song about the royal nuptials between Christ and his bride, the Church.

## SECOND READING: 1Corinthians 15:20-27

In this portion of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he proclaims his faith in resurrection; something this fledgling community had difficulty accepting. He calls the Risen Lord "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." Produce gathered first in the harvest is assurance of the rich bounty yet to come. Paul applies this symbolism to Jesus. His Resurrection from the dead is assurance that "all those who belong to him" will also rise from the dead.

Paul also makes a connection between Jesus and Adam. The first man was the ancestor of all mortals in the world of time. But through Jesus, all are reborn to eternal life. At the conclusion of the reading, Paul assures the Corinthians of their ultimate victory in Christ. In the present age, the

kingdom that Jesus initiated must contend with the kingdoms of the world that resist the message of the Gospel. But at the end of time, the kingdom of heaven will prevail and Jesus will hand it over to the Father.

### **GOSPEL: Luke 1:39-56**

Today's Gospel tells us the story of Mary's visit to her cousin, Elizabeth, and her hymn of thanksgiving to God, *The Magnificat*.

When Mary greets Elizabeth, the New Age greets the Old Age. John the Baptist, the last prophet of the Old Testament, leaps for joy at the arrival of Jesus, who will transform the world with his proclamation of the Gospel. Elizabeth speaks in "a loud voice" because she speaks for all who have waited for this day.

Mary's hymn of thanksgiving celebrates what God does for her and what God does for the world. Mary is so graced by God that the world will always address her as "blessed." The world will be transformed by the presence of Jesus within it. The kingdoms of the world, with their self-serving interests, will ultimately yield to the kingdom of heaven. Humanity, free from the illusions of the powerful, will be able to embrace the truth of the Gospel.

### **FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS**

1. What verse or image spoke to you most in today's readings?
2. Do you have a devotion to Mary? If so, what form does it take?
3. What message does Mary have for women today?
4. Do beliefs like the Assumption of Mary (not mentioned in the bible) ever cause you problems with your Protestant friends and co-workers who do not share most of our beliefs about Mary?

### **RESPONDING TO THE WORD**

Name one way you can act on today's readings. Suggestions: Pray a decade of the rosary for all who are dying at this time. Pray the second Joyful Mystery, the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, for all

pregnant women. Send a donation to a local Crisis Pregnancy Center. If there is an abortion clinic in your area, pray for its closure.

### **CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION**

Pray for some of the above-mentioned intercessions. ©

## TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 22, 2010 C

**Opening prayer:** *Lord, your desire is for all people to be saved. Help us to open our hearts to your saving grace and help us now to open our hearts to the Word you have placed before us today. Amen.*

**Sharing life:** Today's second reading speaks about God's discipline. What kind of discipline did you experience in your home as a child?

**Facilitator reads focus statement:** The first reading and Gospel tell us that all people are invited to be a part of God's Kingdom. The door is open to all. But people must commit to living according to the values of God's Kingdom. Casual acquaintance with God will not be enough. The second reading speaks about the discipline of the Lord.

If you have not read the commentary on the readings prior to the meeting, consider doing so after you read each one. *Pause* briefly at the end of each reading.

### FIRST READING: Isaiah 66:18-21

In this reading, the prophet shares with his people a *universalist* image of God, a God who deeply cares not only for his chosen people, but for *all* people. Using the imagery of a triumphal procession, the author foretells a time when the pagan nations will be drawn to the glory of God which radiates from the Temple in Jerusalem. The pagan nations will even participate in the worship of Israel. Still more shocking is the suggestion that some of these pagans will be chosen by God to be priests and Levites. These words of the prophet would have sounded very threatening and revolutionary to the priests who believed that only the chosen people were loved by God.

### RESPONSORIAL PSALM 117

The note of universalism ("all nations") connects this shortest of all the psalms to the first reading.

### SECOND READING: Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13

It seems the community to whom this letter to the Hebrews is addressed is undergoing some form of suffering and at a loss to explain it. Some see suffering as a punishment for sinful behavior. Others see it as a form of discipline. If patiently worked with, suffering builds character. Quoting the book of Proverbs, it is this latter explanation that is being suggested here. The author compares suffering to a discipline a loving parent imposes on a child and to the discipline an athlete must undergo if he/she is to win the competition.

Having said that, we must not think that God sends us bad things (cancer, losses of various kinds) to "straighten us out." Closer to the truth is that bad things happen because we live in an *evolving* and *imperfect* world. Because medicine is an evolving science, not all sickness can be healed *now*. Because we are imperfect people, we do terrible things to each other. While God does not directly cause these bad things, he does allow them and uses them to build character and to teach us valuable lessons, so as to draw us closer to him. Usually, the finest people in our world are those who have grown through suffering, e.g., Pope John Paul II, Nelson Mandela.

### GOSPEL: Luke 13:22-30

This Gospel is an indirect response to the question: How many will be saved? Rather than offering a direct answer, Jesus says, "First, don't assume the road to salvation is easy. Come through the narrow gate. Don't bring a lot of baggage. Second, remember that we may be surprised by those who get in and those who do not." St. Augustine once said, "*Many whom the Church has, God does not have. Many whom God has, the Church does not have.*" While *all* are invited to salvation, not all will respond. And our response needs to be more than a casual interest in Jesus. Name-dropping ("I'm the son of Abraham") will not get us in. Neither will membership in a Church ("we sat at your table"), nor being from the same town do it ("you preached in our streets"). We may *know* the teachings of Jesus, but not *follow* them. If we only have a casual acquaintance with Jesus, he may say to us, "*I don't know who you are.*" Finally, Jesus warns us that the

door will not remain open forever. Do not keep putting off a decision to follow Jesus.

### **FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS**

1. What verse or image spoke to you most in today's readings?
2. The first reading offers us an image of God that is welcoming to all. How well or poorly is this message communicated in our parish?
3. In the second reading, the author says when it is happening, all discipline (bad things) is painful, but later we can rejoice in it (assuming we have grown through it). Can you give an example of this from your life?
4. In the Gospel, Jesus is clearly saying that casual acquaintance with him is not enough. We must be truly committed. In your opinion, what is the difference between "casual acquaintance" and "true commitment?"

### **RESPONDING TO THE WORD**

Name one way you can act on today's readings. Suggestion: Pray hard and work hard with the bad things that cross your path, with the view to using such things to learn lessons, build character, and draw you closer to God.

### **CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION**

Pray especially for those who are presently experiencing "the discipline of the Lord." ©

## TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 29, 2010 C

**Opening prayer:** *Lord God, your creation reveals the magnitude of your love for us. We thank you for our lives and for the gift of your love made known to us through our brothers and sisters. Teach us humility and gratitude as we come before you and help us now to receive the message you wish us to hear in today's readings. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

**Sharing life:** What are your feelings about dinner parties?

**Facilitator reads focus statement:** The first and third readings stress the importance of humility, especially for those who are in high places. The Gospel challenges us to invite the poor and disenfranchised to our fellowship. The second reading contrasts two covenants, pointing out the joy and blessedness of the new dispensation.

If you have not read the commentary on the readings prior to the meeting, consider doing so after you read each one. *Pause* briefly at the end of each reading.

### FIRST READING: Sirach 3:17-18, 20, 28-29

The author of this book was writing at a time when the wisdom of Israel's pagan neighbors was the envy of the entire world. Most likely, Ben Sira and his students enjoyed upper class status and, as such, were easily impressed by their own self-importance. We should listen to Ben Sira's exhortation on humility against this backdrop. His challenge "*to humble yourself the more, the greater you are*" and the promised reward, "*you will be loved by others and find favor with God*" prepare the way for understanding the great reversal Jesus will announce in the Gospel: "*Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*" The reading ends with a poetic saying about water and almsgiving. Just as water quenches fire, so does almsgiving atone for sins.

### RESPONSORIAL PSALM 68

Among other things, this psalm speaks of God's love for the poor.

### SECOND READING: Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24

This reading contrasts two covenant rituals. The people in the old covenant approach God with fear and trembling. Thanks to Jesus, we the people of the new covenant can approach God with confidence and splendor. The first verses in today's reading refer back to Israel's encounter with God at Mount Sinai. It is an awesome and terrifying event, which emphasizes the great distance between God and his people. In contrast, through the covenant

inaugurated by Jesus, one is able to draw near to the heavenly Mount Sinai where God dwells. The passage depicts God as surrounded by a myriad of angels, as well as by the assembly of the Church – the first-born "registered" in heaven.

### GOSPEL: Luke 14:1, 7-14

The setting for this Gospel is a Sabbath dinner at the home of a leading Pharisee. Sabbath meals were occasions to invite guests. Hence, the presence of Jesus. Jesus used such occasions to do some "kingdom talk." In this case, Jesus contrasts the social behaviors of his day with behavior that should characterize people who belong to the Kingdom of God. Jesus gives two directives, one pertaining to guests and the other for hosts.

As Jesus notices guests "jockeying" for places of honor, he says that in the Kingdom he is inaugurating, status is granted, not sought after. To his host, Jesus says, "when drawing up a 'guest list,' don't invite only people who are 'well-placed,' people with 'good contacts.' Rather, invite the unimportant people in the eyes of society, people who cannot repay you in any way." As people belonging to the Kingdom, we should not just "send over" food to the poor. We should invite the poor to share our table. In God's Kingdom, the host and guest should sit together as equals. In a Christian community, no one is a "project."

### FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse or image spoke to you most in today's readings?

2. Can one be humble in a society where there is so much emphasis on self-promotion and ‘posturing’?

3. Who are the marginalized people in our *church*? For example, would poor working-class Mexicans feel comfortable in your parish? Apart from the language barrier, what do *we* need to do to change this sad situation?

4. In the Gospel, Jesus tells us whom we should invite to our dinner parties. Do you know of anyone who *acts* on this Word of Jesus? Hardly anyone, not even myself, includes the poor on our party list. Shouldn’t we? If not, why not?

### **RESPONDING TO THE WORD**

Name one way you can act on today’s readings. Suggestions: Invite to lunch or spend time with a marginalized person in our parish or wider community. Sit in the back of the church next Sunday and see how that experience is for you.

### **CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION**

Pray for humility and for those who are left on the outside of our church and society. ©

## TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 5, 2010 C

**Opening prayer:** *Loving and all-wise God, you call us together to listen to your Word and share life. Fill us with your holy wisdom so that we may comprehend your Word, and fill us with love so that we may follow your ways no matter what the cost. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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

**Facilitator reads focus statement:** True wisdom comes from on high and enables a person to be guided by the interests of the soul, rather than those of the body. In the Gospel, wisdom is seen as total commitment of one's being to God, even if it means turning one's back on family and possessions. In the second reading, Paul, writing from prison, urges his Christian friend, Philemon, to receive back his newly baptized slave as a "brother in the Lord."

If you have not read the commentary on the readings prior to the meeting, consider doing so after you read each one. *Pause* briefly at the end of each reading.

### FIRST READING: Wisdom 9:13-18

This reading begins with the question: "Who can know the will or plan of God?" The answer is, of course, no one, unless God chooses to reveal it. This is the main point in this reading. The author lists some of the reasons why humans have a most difficult time getting to know the plan of God: weakness and uncertainty. But the principal reason is that the soul, with its intellectual power, is burdened by the body and thus rendered incapable of transcending such limitations.

### RESPONSORIAL PSALM 90

This psalm of lamentation underscores another facet of true wisdom: the recognition of the fragility of life and human mortality.

### SECOND READING: Philemon 1:9-10, 12-17

In this reading from the shortest book of the Bible, (25 verses), Paul presents us with a moral dilemma. Paul is writing to his friend, Philemon, about one of his runaway slaves, Onesimus, who has become a baptized Christian. The returning slave has a new status – he is *spiritually* a free man. In God's eyes, Onesimus is now his master's equal. Paul urges Philemon to treat his slave as a brother in Christ. This presents Philemon with a moral dilemma: if he treats Onesimus as a brother, will not his other slaves run away and be baptized so that they can be treated like Onesimus? If Philemon does not treat Onesimus as a brother, he is denying Onesimus' Christian status.

We may wonder why Paul did not condemn the evil institution of slavery. Neither did Jesus. But both advocated a type of love that should move any disciple like Philemon to consider slaves as equals and to treat them accordingly.

### GOSPEL: Luke 14:25-37

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where he knows he will be rejected and crucified. His disciples are unaware of what is ahead for Jesus (and for those who are loyal to him). They do not understand yet the *cost of discipleship*. So Jesus cautions them that if they are going to be his disciples, they must think it through carefully—that the price to be paid is that Jesus and his concerns must come before attachment to family and possessions. Jesus is not asking the enthusiastic crowd, or us, to literally hate our family or give away all our possessions. ("To hate" is a Semitic expression meaning "to love less.") But in a world where many things demand our loyalty, the claim of Christ and his Gospel must not only be first and foremost but must also redefine our relationship with family and possessions. This will, most likely, demand some detaching, some "hating," understood as "loving less" one's family and possessions.

The two parables underscore the above point. Jesus is asking: "Are you sure you want to follow me? Are you willing to pay the price? Do not be like the man who proceeds to build a house without having calculated the cost of the materials or the general who goes into battle without having analyzed whether he has enough men to win it."

## **FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS**

1. What verse or image spoke to you most and why?
2. In your opinion, what is true wisdom? What can help or hinder you from growing in wisdom?
3. Paul did not advocate nor condemn the evil institution of slavery. How do you feel about the fact that many of the things we buy in stores today are made by slave labor? What can be done about that?
4. We have the saying by Mother Teresa: “Live simply, so that others may simply live.” What one step can you take to clean out some of the clutter in your life and to live a more simple lifestyle? Do you ever take items to your local Thrift Store?

## **RESPONDING TO THE WORD**

Name one way you can act on today’s readings. Suggestion: Clean out some of the clutter in your life. Take some clothes and other items to your local Thrift Store. Make a special effort to live in the now, in the present moment. Do not allow past or future concerns to steal the joy of the now. ©

## TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 12, 2010 C

**Opening prayer:** *Lord, we thank you and praise you for gathering us together to share life and your Word. In today's readings, you reveal yourself to be a God of mercy. Help us always to celebrate your mercy. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

**Sharing life:** How was your week?

**Facilitator reads focus statement:** All three readings speak of God's mercy. In the first reading, God shows mercy to the rebellious Israelites in response to Moses' intercession. In the second reading, Paul reminds us that his conversion is a result of God's mercy. In the Gospel, Jesus presents us with three parables, all of which speak of God's mercy.

If you have not read the commentary on the readings prior to the meeting, consider doing so after you read each one. *Pause* briefly at the end of each reading.

### FIRST READING: EXODUS 32:7-11, 13-14

Our first reading today puts us in touch with the rhythm of *sin and mercy*, which pervades both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. The Israelites are like the Prodigal Son in today's Gospel—both turn their backs on God. Today's reading picks up the story after the "dastardly deed" has been done. The molten calf has been built and the rebellious people, led by Moses' brother Aaron, have offered sacrifice to their god. This incident is a metaphor for Israel's relationship with God. They were a people who constantly disobeyed and rebelled against God.

The author of Exodus portrays God as filled with righteous anger for the rebellious Israelites. He even wants to disown them. In his dialog with Moses, he calls them "your" people. Moses, the "Great Negotiator," gives God two reasons why he should not destroy the Israelites. First, he reminds God that these are not *his* (Moses') people—they are God's. So why does he want to destroy his own people? Then Moses appeals to God for the promises he had made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. How could he renege on those promises? God finally listens to Moses and relents on his threat to punish the people.

### RESPONSORIAL PSALM 51

This is David's famous prayer of mercy after the prophet Nathan awakens David to his sinful acts of murder and adultery.

### SECOND READING: 1Timothy 1:1-17

This is the first of seven readings we will hear in the coming Sundays from Paul's two letters to Timothy. This reading fits in perfectly with the theme of mercy found in the first and third readings. Paul tells us that prior to his conversion, he was a *blasphemer* (for rejecting Christ), a *persecutor* of Christians, and was *arrogant*—three hefty sins. But God had mercy on him. If God had mercy on Paul, the "worst of sinners," surely he will have mercy on all wrongdoers, some of whom may consider themselves beyond the pale of God's mercy.

### GOSPEL: Luke 15:1-32

Commenting on this Gospel, the authors of *Foundations in Faith, Year C*, write:

*Setting the context for today's gospel is the complaint by some of the religious leaders that Jesus welcomes sinners and—making the scandal complete—eats with them. The short form contains two parables: the lost sheep and the lost coin. The long form also includes the parable of the prodigal son, which was read on the fourth Sunday of Lent. All three illustrate God's solicitude in searching for sinners, and the shared joy that accompanies their return to safety (their complete reconciliation to God). But the parable of the prodigal son most of all penetrates the readers' objection, by its sensitive and incisive treatment of the elder brother. Ideally, therefore, the long form of the gospel should be read, for the greater depth the third parable introduces.*

The lost sheep and the lost coin are parallel stories (the second, unique to Luke): one image of God is male (the shepherd), the other female (the woman whose coin is lost). In both, great care is taken to find what is lost. The tenderness of the shepherd, expressed in the detail of taking the sheep on his shoulders, further indicates the loving nature of the search. Each parable concludes with a joyful communal celebration. The celebration is not an after-thought, but an integral part of the lesson of the parables. The reconciliation of the lost is naturally portrayed not as an exercise of grim duty, but as something that delights the heart of God—and can be expected to delight the friends of God as well. This theme is carried through the parable of the prodigal son which elaborates all of these features in rich detail.

However, this last parable brings a new twist as the elder brother strongly reacts to the affection shown by his father to his returning son. When the elder brother's jealousy keeps him away from the feast, the father likewise goes out to him, and in the ensuing conversation, the elder son reveals the depth of his resentment towards his brother. He refers to him not as "my brother" but "that son of yours" (a point which the father gently corrects). He harps on his younger brother's sins, alleging, for instance, his involvement with "loose women" (nowhere mentioned before).

Most poignant of all is his revelation of his feeling of alienation from his father. "All these years I slaved for you," he says. Son though he is and sharing in all that his father owns, has nevertheless made him feel like a slave.

The religious leaders, embittered by Jesus' teaching that repentant sinners will enter the kingdom ahead of those who have kept the law, are likened to the character of the elder brother. The father's response is judicious and practical: he is generous with the elder, but will not abandon the younger. All are invited to the feast. Our church, especially through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, continues Christ's ministry of reconciling sinners to God and others.

### **FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS**

1. What verse or image spoke to you most? Why?

2. What images of God come through to you as you read the first reading? What can we learn from Moses' interaction with God?

3. In your journey with God and the Church, have you ever felt like the lost sheep, the lost coin or the lost son? If so, what helped you to be found and welcomed back to God and/or the Church?

4. Why are some people unable to forgive themselves?

5. In the Gospel, God is imaged as a shepherd, as a woman, and as a father. Which image speaks to you best and why?

### **RESPONDING TO THE WORD**

Is there someone in your life who needs your mercy? If so, pray for the grace to forgive. If not, pray for all who are struggling to forgive some big hurt.

### **CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION**

Pray especially for all who are having a hard time believing in God's divine Mercy and all who are having a difficult time forgiving themselves.©

## TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 19, 2010 C

**Opening prayer:** *Father, we come into your loving presence to share life and your Word. Grant us wisdom and courage when we are confronted with crisis situations in our lives. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.*

**Sharing life:** What is going on in our world at this time that gives you most concern?

**Facilitator reads focus statement:** In the first reading, Amos condemns the rich for being more concerned with money than with true worship. In the Gospel, Jesus speaks about the importance of decisive action in a time of crisis and about using material wealth in a way that will give honor to God. In the second reading, Paul encourages prayers of intercession, especially for leaders.

If you have not read the commentary on the readings prior to the meeting, consider doing so after you read each one. *Pause* briefly at the end of each reading.

### FIRST READING: Amos 8:4-7

This Sunday and next, our first reading is from Amos, a prophet from the Southern Kingdom of Judah who was called by God to preach to the Israelites who lived in the Northern Kingdom. Amos is often called the prophet of social justice. He proclaims that true religion involves not only worship of God on the Sabbath, but also caring for the poor during the rest of the week.

In today's reading, Amos rails against the rich who make a mockery of the Sabbath by carrying out business practices that exploit the poor and defenseless. The merchants describe their own dishonesty in different ways. "Tipping the scales" is a daily occurrence (*ephah* is a dry measure equal to a bushel and *shekel* is a unit of stone weights). In their buying and selling, the merchants adjust the scales to their advantage; the poor pay more and receive less. Despite all their cheating, these merchants continue to worship on the Sabbath. Amos condemns such false religion in the strongest way.

### RESPONSORIAL PSALM 113

God's care for the needy, expressed in these verses, connects this psalm to the first reading.

### SECOND READING: 1 Timothy 2:1-8

Paul urges prayers for all people. He especially singles out those in leadership positions. He also believes that it is God's will that all people be saved.

### GOSPEL: Luke 16:1-13

This is probably the most difficult parable in the New Testament to explain because Jesus appears to be holding up, as a model of behavior, a dishonest manager. Below are two plausible interpretations.

*First interpretation:* Some commentators tell us that the manager isn't really dishonest. In those days, the manager is entitled to a commission for caring for his master's land.

On learning that his manager has squandered his property, the master demands a full accounting of his resources. The manager acts quickly and comes up with a plan in order to redeem himself. When his master's debtors came to pay, the manager lowered the amount owed by charging them little or no commission. By forgoing his commission, the manager is able to account for some or all of the amounts he has squandered. Moreover, he ingratiates himself to the debtors and hopes that they will take care of him when he is fired. What a crafty guy! Jesus comments to his disciples: "*Note how shrewd this child of the world is. He uses wealth well to ensure his earthly future. You, as children of the kingdom, should use wealth well to ensure your place in the heavenly kingdom. You will do this by generously sharing your wealth.*"

*Second interpretation:* The second interpretation disagrees with the attempt to clean up the manager. If he just took a cut on his commission, he should be called "crafty" and not "devious" (as he is called). This second view believes the manager did cheat his master. In this case, Jesus is not praising the man for dishonesty but for his decisive action in

a crisis situation. Jesus notes to his disciples: *“You can learn from this child of the world. In times of crisis don’t just do nothing. Rather, take decisive action.”*

One commentator states: *“Why should we be offended that Jesus found something to praise in a dishonest guy, for all of us are a mixed bag? Unsavory people do have some good qualities, even if it is hard for us to recognize them. The manager’s dishonesty, which Jesus didn’t commend, shouldn’t discolor everything else about the guy.”*

What Jesus praised was the manager’s decisive action in a time of crisis. Disciples should follow this example by taking decisive action to ensure for themselves a place in God’s Kingdom.

The Gospel ends with a series of miscellaneous sayings about money and the right use of it. If a dishonest man can use money, his master’s money, to ensure there will be people to welcome him when he is out of a job, how much more should honest people use their money in such a way that they will be welcomed into the Kingdom of God? While we cannot buy our own way into the Kingdom of God, we can say that the right use of money will place us in a favorable light before God.

### **FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS**

1. What verse or image spoke to you most? Why?
2. How would the Amos-type of person be received in our Church or society today? How do you feel about people who are strong advocates of social justice?
3. Should we, the wealthiest nation in the world, be doing more to help the poor at home and abroad? Does your parish tithe? If not, should it?
4. Our use of the Lord’s blessings to us could save us or condemn us. Do you think most people have little or no sense of this—believing their possessions are theirs to do however *they* want?

### **RESPONDING TO THE WORD**

Name one way you can act on today’s readings. Suggestions: Look for the good in some unsavory character you know. Take time to reflect on how well you are using your blessings to bless others. If

the poor and your Church family are not included in your *Last Will & Testament*, consider revising it.

### **CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION**

Pray for government and Church leaders. Pray for all who do not know Jesus. Pray that all of us would take seriously Jesus’ exhortation to use our material possessions in such a way that God will welcome us into heaven.©