Opinion
Spirituality
Scripture for Life



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by Sr. Carol J. Dempsey

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A story that has gone viral on the internet and that has been quoted by poets and other writers is the story of the Bemba people who come mainly from Zambia. The story, quoted by Alice Walker in her book *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For* and expanded in the Tennessee local newspaper The Chatanoogan, can be summarized as follows: A group of people known as the people of Bemba believe that every human who comes into the world is good. Every person's deepest desire is for safety, love, peace and happiness. When someone from this group of people acts unjustly or irresponsibly, then that person is required to stand in the center of the village, alone and unrestrained. The other members of the Bemba people are called together and they gather in a large circle around the one who has been accused of some wrongdoing.

Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 31, 2019

Joshua 5:9a, 10-12

Psalms 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7

2 Corinthans 5:17-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Each person gathered around the accused then begins to speak, recalling all the good things that the accused person has done throughout the course of a lifetime. Many good deeds are mentioned in great detail. All of the accused's positive attributes, strengths, kindnesses and efforts on behalf of the common good are recited carefully by different members of the group.

When everyone has spoken on behalf of the accused one, all the members of the Bemba people break the circle and a joyous celebration takes place. The one who had committed an injustice or who had behaved badly is now welcomed back into the group and given a fresh start. Past deeds are now forgotten as celebration and reconciliation intersect. The Bemba people are stronger and more unified because of this ritual, and their focus is on the positive aspects of the person instead of the negative. This pastoral response, instead of a punitive one, supports the community

in the face of difficult situations.



(Mark Bartholomew)

This story sets the tone for this Sunday's readings, which capture the essence of celebration and reconciliation. In the reading from Joshua, we hear that God has freed the Israelites from the reproach of Egypt. Their newfound freedom and their deepening relational experience of their God brings them to the point of celebrating Passover while they are encamped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho.

Various verses from Psalm 34 celebrate God's goodness. The psalmist begins offering words of blessing and praise to God and then invites the community to join in. The psalmist makes clear that Israel's God is worthy to be praised because this God not only hears the cry of the poor but also does something about it. The words of the psalmist are glad tidings to the lowly.

The reading from 2 Corinthians celebrates the good news about reconciliation. According to Paul, God is reconciled to the world through Christ. Christians are now called to enter into the ministry of reconciliation especially since they, together with Paul, have been entrusted with the message of reconciliation. Paul calls the community at Corinth, and by extension, all Christians, all people, to be reconciled to God. Paul envisions a God who is full of compassion, who keeps no tally of transgressions, and who does not hold offenses against those who have done them.

The themes of celebration and reconciliation come together in the parable of the prodigal son heard in this Sunday's Gospel from Luke. Jesus addresses this parable to a group of complaining Pharisees and scribes who take issue with Jesus' interaction with sinners. In this story, we hear about the precocious younger son of an estate owner making bad decisions about the inheritance given to him by his father. He sets off to a distant country, but because of poor choices, he becomes destitute. Meanwhile, his older brother remains at home and fares well because of the good choices he made with respect to his inheritance.

As the story progresses, we see the struggles of the younger son, his decision to return home, and his father's warm welcome that is much to the chagrin of his older brother. Significant is the point that when the younger son does return home, the father's warm embrace allows the wayward son to be honest, open and make amends with his father.

Thus, in all of Sunday's readings, we hear about the graciousness of God, especially embodied in the estate owner. The intersection of celebration and reconciliation leads to deeper and fuller union with the sacred, divine presence many of us call God. This in turn leads to life becoming a new creation.

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Editor's note: *This Sunday Scripture commentary was originally published in Celebration, a comprehensive pastoral resource. To read the full version of the commentary, click here. Sign up to receive weekly Scripture for Life emails.*

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