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February 26, 2017

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When I lived among impoverished people in Peru I was initially shocked when my neighborhood friends would go all out for a celebration of someone's birthday or baptism. They would serve food I thought they couldn't spare to guests who came to pray with them as they waked a deceased family member in the front room. Didn't they understand the need to conserve, to save for tomorrow?

Slowly I learned about a different set of values. A good party proclaims that the person we celebrated — whether alive or dead — is of incalculable value while money is only money, and more often than not it was in a spiral of devaluation. Additionally, people who live hand to mouth know too well that tomorrow is never guaranteed. You might save a few cents, but who's to assure that you'll be here tomorrow to enjoy it? Just ask the people of Haiti who survived the earthquake of 2010 and got hit with hurricane Matthew in 2016! A country that can "boast" of an entire Wikipedia entry just for its natural disasters will understand Jesus' assertion that guests can't fast while the bridegroom is with them but they'll probably shake their heads at the saying, "A penny saved is a penny earned."

Somehow poverty can teach people that when you face an unknown and uncontrollable future you should make everything possible of the moment at hand. They don't go out naked with the hopes that God will cause clothes to grow on them,

but they also understand the futility of worry — it adds nothing to the quality or expanse of life and health.

There's another bit of wisdom hidden in the tendency to party in spite of poverty. That is that celebrations create community. Folks participate in one another's lives and become more and more bound to one another. The Spanish phrase "My house is your house" becomes ever more true as the whole neighborhood watches out for the kids playing on the street and everyone knows when the old man on the corner will go without dinner if somebody doesn't do something about it this afternoon.

Another thing that I learned slowly among my Peruvian friends was a recognition of God's bounty. When that elderly gentleman down the block received a dinner plate he would say "God provides." Now in my book, the provider was Señora Mendoza who had cooked and delivered the dinner, but somehow the venerable Señor Quispe knew that God was behind it all, and Señora Mendoza would agree. Another one of those generous women once commented, "If we have an acre of corn, we mustn't harvest it all. If we did, where would the poor find food?" If that's not God's providence at work, what is?

Impoverished people who live as neighbors creating community seem to have found the blueprint for building up the reign of God. They ask, "What kind of world are we creating?" If Señor Quispe had made his home a fortress with locked gates, on the day he was too weak to provide for himself, nobody might have known, and if they had, they wouldn't have been able to get in to help.

Jesus told his followers not to worry about life, food, drink or clothes, but rather to seek the kingdom of God and its righteousness because everything else would come in its stead. It seems that the more we have, the more we tend to count on our own ability to procure and keep what we need. Are we putting more faith in IRAs, insurance policies and good locks than we do in God? The answer to that question might be found in how much we are willing to risk to help a neighbor, be that the person across the street or the refugees pleading for a place of safety now that their homes have been destroyed by warring factions over whom they have no influence. When my friend talked of leaving some corn in her little field she was teaching that if we watch out only for ourselves, poor mothers will not be able to feed their children. And like a mother, she saw every hungry child as somehow her own.

Jesus not only told his disciples to trust in God, but he also promised that those who left the security of home and family for his sake would receive a hundred times more in return. That promise comes true as we create the sort of community that can celebrate just because life is good and can share the little we have because we know it is all a gift.

ISAIAH 49: 14-15

This very short passage plays with two images for God, one that comes from dejected Zion and the other from the very mouth of God. Interestingly, Zion's complaint about God comes immediately after a number of verses in which God promises that their salvation was on the way. Apparently, God's promised "time of favor" seemed too far off because today's verse begins with the people's complaint that God has forgotten them.

Israel's grievance against God compares the people to an abandoned wife. They say "God has deserted me." They're crying out in despair. They were grieving that they hadn't even gotten the respect of the rights that would come with a divorce. They feel abandoned and forgotten as if God simply walked out on them. Like a wife whose husband has disappeared, they feel public shame, almost questioning whether the relationship ever existed.

That's the cue for God to counter their accusation with an entirely different image. A runaway husband? No, not this God! "Can a woman forget the child of her womb?" If the choice of a spouse is a commitment, how very much more the divine decision to give birth to this people? God's relationship to them can only be compared to motherhood, an intimacy that is unrepeatable and irreversible. But God goes even further: a mother doesn't decide which child shall be hers: God chose this people in particular. God's promise is irrevocable: I will never forget you.

1 CORINTHIANS 4:1-5

One way to approach this selection from the first letter to the Corinthians is to see it as an exploration of identity. Paul invites the community to see themselves, himself included, as "servants" and "stewards" of the mysteries of God. As he goes on he elaborates on each of those terms.

The word translated here as “servants” is rather unusual and literally means “under rowers” referring to the crew of a boat. This presents an image of a community in motion toward a goal that is set for them. Paul might be seen as the one who calls the rowing rhythm, being sure that the rowers work together. The point he makes with this colorful word is clearly that they have a task and a goal that has involved them in something bigger than themselves and their own ambitions.

The second word Paul uses, stewards, is much more familiar to his audience and to the Christian Scriptures. “Steward” generally referred to a slave who exercised significant responsibility. In those days, a person was not necessarily a slave for life and certainly not under the conditions known in 19th century America. A slave could earn enough to buy freedom. A steward/slave had great control over household affairs. A steward was expected to be both faithful and of one accord with the master.

Paul’s description of the community includes two complimentary dimensions. First, the members of the community are Christ’s crew, workers without whom the goal cannot be reached. This implies hard toil and obedience. The idea of stewardship complements the role of rowers implying that they exercised both authority and responsibility for the master’s business.

Paul specifies that the concern of the master is none other than the mysteries of God, an idea he’s been working with throughout this first part of the letter. This mystery is the experience of being enlivened and oriented by the Spirit of God. It is a mystery that cannot be fully grasped even though it is experienced as true. One comprehends the mystery of God only by living it. Another word for it could be the experience of grace, God’s love active in a person and in the community. More accurately, the community cannot grasp the mystery of God, but rather they are grasped by it and thus impelled to serve it as surely as a thirsty person is impelled to seek water.

Paul goes on to say that neither his judgments nor anyone else’s matter in pursuing this life of stewardship. As Christ’s crew, the community can only do their best, trusting that God is guiding them. They want to strive toward a goal so attractive that they are willing to bet their lives on it even while they admit that they barely understand it. God has not promised success and certainly does not demand it. All God asks is faithfulness. Paul uses these images to help the community see themselves against an eschatological horizon. Until the day when Christ brings

everything to fulfillment, they can make no definitive judgments, they are simply stewards, rowers trying to advance the mystery that gives them life and hope.

MATTHEW 6:24-34

In today's segment from the Sermon on the Mount Jesus teaches about the demands of discipleship. Later on, he will tell the disciples to go out without provisions (Matthew 10:9-10) and that giving up home and hearth for him will bring them a hundred-fold (Matthew 19:29). Here, during their early experiences with him it's as if Jesus were giving them their freshman orientation, making it as clear as he can that discipleship is an all or nothing venture. Jesus actually uses the vocabulary of slavery to describe their relationship to God — although in this case, the individuals would choose freely which master they would serve.

As he developed this teaching, Jesus continued to use vivid language to describe discipleship. When he said that servants can be “devoted” to only one master, the Greek word Matthew quoted means to cling to something in such a way that the one holding on becomes like that which is held. That's an idea we see repeated in the Parable of the Talents (Mt. 25:14-30) where the servants who acted like the master were rewarded while the one who feared him was rejected. The strength of this concept translates well into English with the word “devoted.” “Devoted” derives from words which mean to make a vow. A synonym for “devoted” is “consecrated.” The relationship Jesus expects between disciples and God is uncompromising. There's no wiggle room.

The opposite of devotion to God is service of mammon. Mammon is not the devil or even money in particular, but rather possessions in a comprehensive sense. Jesus was pointing out how easy it is to become a slave of what we think we own — we need only note how a cell phone can take priority over everything from the family dinner table to the driver's seat. Given the automatic and unfailing obedience we give to a ring tone, one would think that failing to answer involved a public display of immorality. It's small comfort to realize that the tendency to allow our things to dominate us is anything but new in human history.

After speaking about the exclusivity of commitment involved in discipleship, Jesus goes on to explain what discipleship offers. We might look at this as part of the longest-lasting and most audacious advertising campaign ever broadcast. For nearly 2,000 years, humanity has heard Jesus say, “You've got nothing to worry about!

Clothing? If the birds don't worry, why should you? Food? In case you didn't notice, the earth and its oceans were custom designed to produce and reproduce it for every creature that will ever live!" We might ask why it is so easy to believe something like "You're in good hands with Allstate," while we're so reluctant to let Jesus' assurances guide us. Perhaps it's the psychology of a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush; like Isaiah's dejected people, we'll trust the limited warranty on our car brakes more than God's promise of life.

We need to understand the injunction not to worry as an extension of Jesus' teaching about discipleship. He actually claimed that it's pagan to waste our time on concerns about food and drink. According to Jesus, life is all about seeking God's kingdom and if we really do that, everything else will fall into place.

The truth is that in Jesus' time as in our own, we have a limited attention span. Even the acts of seeing and hearing are discernments about what deserves our attention and what is only peripheral. Jesus is not suggesting that we don't need to dress for work or pack a lunch, but rather that the way we do so will make all the difference. It's like the distinction between the two 13th century laborers working next to each other in Chartres; when asked what they were doing one said he was laying bricks and the other that he was building a cathedral.

Pope Francis would have us understand that serving God and seeking the kingdom of heaven implies "a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable ... development" of our world (*Laudato Si'*, On Care for Our Common Home #13). Jesus oriented the freshmen disciples, the course Francis is teaching might be called "Discipleship 2017."

The call of today's Gospel is becoming devoted disciples who trust the God who loves us like a mother and promises that we've got everything we need as long as we are willing to share it.

Planning: 8th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

Today's readings offer us another entry point into the spirit of Lent. It is perhaps best focused in the psalm refrain: "Rest in God alone, my soul." While Lent is a time to work on areas of our life that need to change, the power to make such changes

can only come from God's grace. Lent might be seen first as a time to rest in God's presence, to take time for prayer and meditation. The more closely we are connected to God, the more our lives will change in accord with God's will.

The first reading assures us that God will never forget us, but it is all too easy for us to forget God. Lent is a time to invite people to become more aware of God's constant presence in our lives. In today's Gospel, Jesus insists that we cannot serve two masters, so God must come first in our lives. But notice that he reminds us that God cares for us even more than for the wildflowers and the sparrows. This awareness of how deeply God cares for us should be the basis of our whole spiritual life, the reason we live by the God's commandments and seek to share God's love with those around us, especially those in need. Lent is a time to savor this immensely deep love for us, to let it truly sink into our minds and hearts that we are cherished by our creator and invited to share God's very life.

There has been increased attention in recent years to the practice of Christian contemplation. Consider offering parishioners the opportunity during Lent to explore this style of prayer which has the potential to draw us more deeply into God's presence. Other opportunities for encouraging contemplative prayer might include providing a "Lenten lending library" where books on the topic could be available. At the very least, offer an explanation and resources in the bulletin or the parish website about this method of prayer.

Ash Wednesday: Lent begins this Wednesday. This Sunday is a good time to gather palms from previous years to create the ashes to be used at Wednesday's services. Invite the parish to participate in a simple ceremony where the palms are burned.

On Ash Wednesday, provide several opportunities throughout the day for people to receive ashes. Be sure that each service is done well, whether it is within a Mass or within a Liturgy of the Word service. See the rubrics at the end of Ash Wednesday in the *Roman Missal* or chapter 52 in the *Book of Blessings* for details about blessing and distributing ashes outside of Mass.

Prayers: 8th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Today's readings are for those of us who worry too much. It may seem that our culture and our time in history have a role in creating our chattering minds and endless anxiety. News of threat and danger confront us daily. But today's Gospel reminds us that worry is a constant in life. There are lots of techniques to help us, but Jesus tells us to stay focused on the reign of God and let tomorrow take care of itself. Like all solutions and techniques, it will only work if we do it.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you tell us not to worry about our lives: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you tell us that God knows what we need: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to seek the reign of God and let go of tomorrow: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray now for our own concerns and the concerns of the whole world.

Minister For the church: That it may be a witness to our calling to live without fear...we pray,

- For all who live in fear of violence or who fear for their safety, especially in places of danger and unrest...we pray,
- For those who live in fear of losing what they possess, especially those who have little...we pray,
- For those who use people's fear for personal, political or financial gain...we pray,
- For those who fear for their children, their loved ones or the future...we pray,
- For those who minister to or work to heal the anxious, the fearful, the discouraged, the dying...we pray,
- For all who live in any kind of need, especially those we have pledged to serve through our parish ministries...we pray,
- For the sick and the grieving among us, and for those who have died...(names) ...we pray,

Presider God who knows our needs, we are called to remember that you love and care for us. Help us to love you, to seek your Kingdom, and live the Gospel without fear. We ask this in the name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.

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