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July 9, 2017

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"I give praise to you, Father ... for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned, you have revealed them to little ones." That's a prayer designed to throw us off center. If we're looking for an ego-boost for being disciples, Jesus' prayer just set us straight. He's thanking God that the unsophisticated have understood him. He praises God because his followers are the folks nobody thinks of as wise or learned. If a bunch of scientists or college students who had just finished their first philosophy course, characterized our Sunday Mass crowd this way, we'd be haughtily insulted. The implication seems pretty clear that only the naïve or needy find answers in Christ.

In reality, the point Jesus is making is not that he's seeking the senseless. It's true, he does hang out with the poor and reach out first to the children, the possessed, the infirm, etc., but the key insight here is that Jesus' message is impenetrably obscure to folks whose heads and hearts are too full of their own ideas and opinions. They are the self-appointed wise and worldly who can't afford to jeopardize their hard-won and rigidly held security, maybe even their identity, by opening themselves to the alternatives Jesus presents. The risk involved in exposing themselves to an alternative perception of life and faith is an option that sounds pretty dumb to a lot of people. (It's one of those crazy conundrums like "You must

lose your life to save it.”)

To understand what’s going on with Jesus’ prayer about the “little ones” we need to look at the context. Jesus had just finished a serious harangue about the people who criticized John the Baptist for being austere and himself for too much enjoyment of life. He followed that with a dressing down of the towns that rejected him after being the beneficiaries of his ministry. Apparently, even if you are the Son of God, it hurts to be dismissed.

What Jesus prays next is more revealing than we might think. He says, “Yes, Father, such has been your gracious will.” Jesus is praying another version of “Thy will be done,” only now he declares his willingness to obey even as he is discovering God’s will. His dialogue with God might be reworded to say: “These are the ones you are sending me, Father. What am I to learn from this? What am I to do with this?”

In what can sound like a non-sequitur, Jesus then announces that he knows God just as God knows him and that he can reveal God to others. If we understand that in the light of Jesus’ process of discovering God’s will, we see that he is explaining that he knows God through a growing, changing relationship, not via the theory of settled dogma. As he recognizes the Father and the Father’s will in what is happening in his life, he gives thanks that the Father is with him — even in ways that he did not anticipate such as his experience of who accepted and who rejected him and his message.

This short Gospel gives us a very telling picture of Jesus, his prayer, his discernment and his trust in God. Whereas the majority of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew’s Gospel happens through discourses and parables, in this passage Jesus teaches by letting us witness his own relationship with the Father and his discernment of God’s will for him. Ultimately, he shows us how to pray the hardest kind of prayer. In the midst of frustration and feelings of failure, he gives thanks. Jesus shows us that the clean of heart can find God in any circumstances. This prayer is a demonstration of profound faith in the God whose ways are not our ways.

Finally, after exposing his own process of prayer and discernment to anyone who would listen, Jesus invited them into the very same process. “Come to me ... I will give you rest.” When he tells us “Take my yoke,” he is saying: “Do as I do, trust as I do. You don’t have to think that the world depends on the success of your plans. When I said that the meek would inherit the earth, I meant that it’s an inheritance,

not wages or even a bonus.”

Today’s Gospel challenges us to be as simple, as meek and humble, as obedient as Jesus himself. He leads us to give thanks when we are thrown off center, diverted from our own plans and schemes. Jesus offers his own yoke of trusting that God is present and leading us in the precise circumstances of each moment — whether or not we would have chosen them.

## **ZECHARIAH 9:9-10**

This reading sounds like a return to Holy Week with the victor riding triumphantly into the city. The image of the king who comes on a colt is confusing to 21st century people for whom the image of a donkey has nothing to do with biblical ideas. The king’s mount here is more like a popemobile than Pope Francis’ notorious 1984 Renault.

Zechariah portrayed the mounted king as a peaceful ruler. When he declares that the king will banish horse and chariot he’s reminding people of the Exodus escape when Moses and the Israelites sang, “I will sing to the Lord, for he is gloriously triumphant, horse and chariot he has cast into the sea” (Exodus 15:1). Zechariah’s king has plenty of glory and none of it depends on the trappings of war and domination.

This king is just. In the eyes of the poor, that’s the greatest promise possible. To the ears of the powerful, it sounds like a threat. The king is also described as meek. In this context that indicates that he doesn’t arrogate all the honor to himself, but recognizes that God has been his strength and God will provide the power to carry out his royal mission.

This prophecy is universal in outlook. Although the wording “from sea to sea” may have inspired U.S. poets in their visions of “Manifest Destiny,” the biblical concept actually proffers a strong critique of everything that smacks of chauvinistic nationalism. When the prophet speaks of a dominion that stretches “from sea to sea and the River to the ends of the earth” he’s describing the known world, what we in the 21st century would imagine via a photograph of the earth from space. This king’s peace-building rule erases boundaries. On the weekend after the celebration in the U.S. of the Fourth of July, Zechariah’s prophecy invites us to look at the intersection of our civil and religious life and ask what kind of leadership we seek

and support.

### **ROMANS 8:9, 11-13**

It's as easy as it is mistaken to interpret Paul's categories of flesh and spirit as reflective of the body-soul dualism many of us imbibed as children. Lots of us were taught to think of the flesh or body as the temporary, corruptible, less valuable dimension of our lives, the part of ourselves we will escape when the spirit or soul gets released at death to live forever, probably without any appetites at all, simply content in the presence of God.

That is not at all reflective of Paul's thinking.

For Paul, flesh and spirit speak of two orientations toward life. People who live "in the flesh" are preoccupied with glittering trivialities that ultimately deceive their devotees. People who live in the flesh place immense value on such things as attractiveness, dominance, wealth or fame. Being in the flesh is always egoistic, and therefore, ultimately isolates the individual as much as it harms others. It is the realm of death. Nevertheless, the world around us, whether in Paul's day or our own, is full of propaganda for the shallowest of values and attitudes.

Paul uses a creative and vivid image to remind the community that the ways of the flesh have been relegated to their past. He says, "We are not debtors to the flesh." All those values that used to put a social-acceptability appraisal on their worth have been eliminated. Because the Spirit dwells in them they have no more obligation to be "in" with society, whatever "in" might mean in any given age.

Interestingly, Paul doesn't go on to say that Christians are now debtors to Christ or the community. All debts have been cancelled. Christians are absolutely free.

Paul wants his community to remember, to understand, and to live out the reality of what it means to be in Christ. He wants them to grasp the fact that they can live with the very same freedom that motivated Jesus in his life. They have become different; all they need to do is take hold of the freedom that is now theirs.

The final verses of this selection offer Paul's version of the Nike slogan "Just do it!" He's saying that Christ's life and death have shown us that the old way offers death via the lonely road of slow, sure loss of beauty and strength; through the ultimate realization that dominance is fleeting; that wealth is powerless to bring joy; and that

fame is terribly transient. But Paul says, “You have received the possibility of living by the Spirit. You can see through the flesh with all its phony enticements. You have discovered the way to life and you are free to take it.”

“Go for it!”

## **MATTHEW 11:25-30**

As Matthew set up his Gospel, the selection we hear today is part of a general presentation of resistance to Jesus’ teaching. Immediately before our opening line, Jesus had reviled the cities that had seen his works but rejected his message. Then with his next breath he said, “I give praise to you, Father ... you have revealed [these things] to little ones.” It seems as if his prayer of praise gives us a glimpse of Jesus’ own attitude adjustment, his discernment of how God’s ways were as surprising as rejection was distressing.

However much Jesus would have wanted the authorities to accept him, that wasn’t happening. Instead, simple folk flocked to him. Jesus clearly believed that if he was preaching God’s word, God’s will must have been hidden in those responses. Jesus’ prayer, spoken out loud in the presence of his disciples, revealed how he saw God working – in, in spite of, or far beyond his own hopes and plans.

Thinking of Jesus’ prayer as revelatory of his relationship with God sheds light on his next statement. Scholars refer to Jesus’ declaration about the complete mutual sharing of power and knowledge between Jesus and the Father as a Johannine thunderbolt in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Nowhere else in the synoptic Gospels does Jesus make any claims like these. But, this may say something very different from John’s presentation of Jesus, something much more in tune with the lower Christology of the first three evangelists.

Jesus introduces his description of his intimacy with God saying, “Such has been your gracious will.” As he says that, he seems to be simultaneously discovering and accepting the will of God. Following that line of thought, when Jesus talks about knowing and being known by the Father, he’s not referring to a settled body of knowledge or something like a divine facial recognition program. He’s talking about the knowing that happens in relationship, the kind of knowing that is growing and ongoing.

Seen in this light, Jesus' prayer in today's Gospel presents an early and less painful illustration of the kind of discernment Jesus went through at Gethsemane when he asked to avoid the cup but accepted God's will (Matthew 26:39, 42, 44). This prayer reveals Jesus as the obedient teacher. His search for God's will as well as his acceptance of it surely taught the disciples more than any sermon he preached. Or, better said, Jesus allowed his disciples to see his own process of prayer put flesh on every sermon he preached.

Taking into account the idea that Jesus was discovering the will of God and accepting it with joy, we can interpret the last verses of today's Gospel in a new light as well. Jesus says: "Take my yoke ... learn from me." What is the yoke Jesus has just shown us? It is the yoke of learning from the Father, the yoke of unmet expectations countered by the discovery of grace in unexpected places.

Jesus says "I am meek and humble of heart." In the Gospels, the word "meek" appears only here and in Matthew's beatitudes. According to Daniel Harrington in *The Gospel of Matthew*, the meek are the *anawim* of the Hebrew Scriptures, that is the poor, the vulnerable, the marginalized, those who had no one on whom to rely other than their God. What the idea of being humble of heart adds to meekness is the element of choice. To be poor is an involuntary condition and everyone is poor in the face of God. Because the heart is the source of volition, being humble of heart indicates a choice to recognize and accept one's innate poverty.

When Jesus invited his audience to take his yoke and learn from him, he was inviting them to learn from his prayer, from his discernment and from his rejoicing in God's surprising will. What he implied without saying so explicitly was that to learn from him meant to learn how to discover, accept and do God's will. Those who can give themselves to God, who can take on Jesus' yoke and imitate his humility of heart need no longer worry about carrying out their own agenda or being a success or failure. They can rest in the assurance that God's gracious will is being accomplished even when, or perhaps especially when, they do not see the results. That is, indeed, an easy yoke for which we need do no more than simply thank God.

## **Planning: 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**By:** Lawrence Mick

Our second reading today from Paul's Letter to the Romans raises a significant issue for consideration. At the beginning of this passage Paul insists, "You are not in the flesh; on the contrary, you are in the spirit, if only the Spirit of God dwells in you." The passage ends with similar language: "We are not debtors to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh, you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

Language like this has led many Christians to see the body as evil and a source of sin. That has led to efforts to deny and even abuse our bodies in hope of becoming "spiritual," as opposed to "bodily." This has created a false spirituality that assumes we need to become like angels in order to be holy.

This perspective flows largely from misinterpreting what Paul means by "the flesh." It does not mean the body nor does it mean sexual desires and activity. For Paul, "flesh" means unredeemed human existence. Here's how Fr. Charles Irvin, retired priest from the Diocese of Lansing, puts it: "St. Paul uses the word flesh to speak of human frailty, a concept that goes far beyond that which is merely sensual. St. Paul isn't limiting himself to sins of human sensuality. He is instead pointing to human weaknesses, particularly sins that include idolatry, materialism, hatred and racism, rivalry and competitiveness, jealousy, envy, elitism, arrogance, acts of violence, and all such like. When we contrast the concept of flesh (as St. Paul understands it) with its opposite, we find him speaking about the dominion of the Spirit. In another epistle he tells us that what the spirit produces in us is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness and self-control."

Preachers would do well this weekend to explain what Paul really means, lest we continue to reinforce a negative view of the human body that is at odds with the Incarnation itself. God took on a human body, so the body is clearly not evil. Even Paul's words in the passage indicate that: "The one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit that dwells in you." Our bodies are temples of the Lord.

Planners might give some thought this week to how well the parish liturgies involve our bodies. Do people know how to process with dignity and joy? Does the assembly stay standing until all have received Communion, expressing unity through their bodies? Do people genuflect and kneel with reverence when such postures are appropriate? Does the assembly bow at the proper time during the creed? Is any catechesis needed on the importance of worshiping with our bodies?

# Prayers: 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

**By:** Joan DeMerchant

## Introduction

Today's hopeful readings are full of promise. These words speak to people coming out of exile, to Jesus' followers who are burdened, to those struggling to live as early Christians. Living in a time when we are burdened by information, negative or misleading, or disinformation as well as serious divisions and threats, we, too, need encouragement. We seek honorable leaders and words we can trust. Do we allow God's word to be a true source of good news for us? What would happen if we allowed ourselves to accept Jesus' invitation to come to him for rest?

## Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you recognized that your followers were heavily burdened: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you invited them to come to you and learn from you: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you offer the same invitation to us, who are also burdened: Lord, have mercy.

## Prayer of the Faithful

**Presider** Let us pray for all who carry heavy burdens.

**Minister** For all of us in the church who grow weary or frightened, despite our faith ... we pray,

- For those who have lost hope in the future, who cannot find any source of good news...we pray,
- For believers who have lost hope or who doubt the veracity of God's word ... we pray,
- For those who have become cynical, who are overwhelmed by negativism, doubt or confusion ... we pray,
- For catechists, teachers, pastors, theologians, writers and all who are dedicated to sharing the good news ... we pray,
- For families who need time for recreation during these summer months, but especially for those who cannot afford it ... we pray,



- For the hungry, the homeless and the lonely; and for those who have died ...  
(*names*) ... we pray,

**Presider** Good and loving God, we come to you as people who are sometimes — or often burdened. Give us the strength and courage to live Jesus' call, no matter how difficult that may be. Help us to encourage one another, so that we may all belong to the One in whose name we pray. Amen.

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