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October 1, 2017

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We've probably all heard the story of this little girl, we call her Angelica, but her whole name is Michelle Angelica. She's aspiring to become a great artist. One day Angelica spread out all her crayons and bent over a large piece of paper. For a long time, she worked and concentrated as hard as she could. When her older brother came by and asked what she was doing, she replied, "I'm drawing a picture of God." The brother smirked and said, "Nobody knows what God looks like!" Angelica simply replied, "They will when I'm finished!"

While we may have never tried to draw God's picture, we all have implicit images of God, some of which we have articulated, some of which are all the more powerful for not having been brought to consciousness. Our hymns, religious art and the prayers we've learned have all subtly shaped our theology from the time we could focus or understand the words we heard.

One way we might uncover our implicit theology is by asking what we pray for and what we expect from prayer. We can learn a lot by questioning our theology in the mode of a five-year-old. What do we think God does all day, and what do we ask God to do?

When we demand punishment for crime or strive to learn someone else's language, we are unconsciously putting our theology on display. Our day-to-day activities and choices demonstrate what we see as the meaning of life and indicate what we think God is concerned about. That's the idea behind what Paul told the Philippian community when he said to them: "Have in you the same attitude that is also in Christ Jesus." Paul went on to quote a well-known hymn that proclaimed the scandalously new image of God that they had encountered in Christ.

The very first line proclaimed the essence of Christian faith. Christ Jesus was in the form of God. That is to say: "If you want to know what God looks like, look to this man." The next line gets to the scandal of the Christian revelation: He "did not regard equality with God something to be grasped." That means that Christ was unconcerned about looking like what people thought God should look like. His mode of portraying God in human form had nothing to do with shows of power or imposing dignity. In fact, it was the very opposite.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus had tried to impart this idea to his disciples. They were fine with the idea that he was God's representative, but they had their own concept of what that should look like. Writing 20 or 30 years after Jesus' death, Paul used this hymn that shows how the community was coming to understand Christ's life and message.

This hymn tells us that the God revealed in Jesus is more self-emptying than majestic. We think of power as the ability to control. But this describes divine power as the willingness to be in solidarity with humanity, even or especially in the direst of circumstances.

Paul says, "He humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death." This indicates that to be divine is to be humble. It also explains Jesus' obedience as full communion with the Father whose desire was simply to share life with humanity. As the one who was divine and human, Jesus' life portrayed self-giving as God's constant activity and humanity's greatest possibility.

The last part of the hymn is the confirmation. Christ's way of giving himself, of remaining true even through the most degrading maltreatment humanity could invent, was the most perfect portrait of the self-giving God that history will ever know. Because of that, Paul says, God exalted him.

This is heady stuff. It requires all the concentration we can give it. This song proclaims the theory, the theology. We may be able to sing it. We probably ought to measure our other hymns in its light. But, we need the Gospels to see it fleshed out — not only the Gospels, but the lives of our Christian community, past, present and future.

That's exactly what Paul was telling the Philippians. You know what Christ was like. You know how he revealed that God's activity is an eternal self-giving, no matter the response. Therefore, go and do likewise! Let that love come alive in you! Forget your petty egoism and vanity. Show the world what divinity looks like! In the process, you will become all you were created to be.

### **EZEKIEL 18:25-28**

Ezekiel wrote at a time when people were beginning to understand morality as an individual affair as well as a communal one. Previously, the nation as a whole was either with God or not; now prophets and people were developing a sense of personal morality. Just as the nation was in exile because of their collective betrayal of the covenant, so an individual could be responsible for his or her own fate by cultivating virtue or iniquity.

Robert Jensen in *Ezekiel* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible) points out that life and death in this reading do not simply refer to a biological state of being. What makes life real are the relationships one has with God and others. The tragedy of death is the loss of those life-giving relationships. Thus, when the prophet says that the virtuous will live and the wicked will die, he's talking about being alive to a relationship with God or cutting oneself off from it. When the people complain that God's way is not fair, they are actually protesting the fact that they have to live with the results of their free choices.

Why would one turn from good to evil? It's hard to imagine what would cause one to abandon good if they knew the joy of relationship with God. But, if doing good were more a matter of appearance than relationship, if one was simply seeking reward or comfort, then doing good might not pay enough dividends. The person who abandons virtue may have never been virtuous in the first place, but rather self-seeking in a way that appeared honorable. On the other hand, when people turn from folly and shallowness and seek the righteousness of a living relationship with God, they have opened themselves to everything that life has to offer.

The beauty of this teaching is that as long as we live, we are capable of growth, of receiving the life God desires to give us. The hidden promise of this teaching is that even if one's commitment to good is so shallow as to be lost, that person still has a chance to come back.

## **PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11**

Paul exposes his heart as well as his spirituality in this selection from Philippians. His love for the community is palpable as he reminds them of the blessings they have in Christ and in his plea that they live in a Christ-like communion of love and service. The Philippians easily understood what Paul was saying in his long first sentence, but the vocabulary is not ours and is well worth investigating.

Paul opened his plea by appealing to the encouragement the community experienced in Christ. "Encouragement" translates as *paraklesis*, the same word we find in John for the Spirit-comforter. It refers to someone who stands in solidarity with, behind or for another. In this case, the solidarity the community knows is a characteristic of their being together in Christ.

The next phrase, "solace in love," develops the idea of solidarity as remaining beside one another in *agape* love. That love, which is a grace in itself, binds the community together with Christ's own love. Building on that, Paul talks about "participation in the Spirit" or *koinonia* (community). This conveys the sense of a human community bound by more than their own efforts or decisions. One secular sense of *koinonia* referred to an inheritance held by a group, not as individuals each with their own piece or parcel, but in joint ownership of the whole. Thus, what they have is a source and product of their being together.

Finally, Paul remembers the compassion and mercy they have experienced as members of the Christian community. Compassion is the translation of *splanchna*, a Greek term that refers to guts or the womb. It describes a shared feeling so deep that it has physical effects; they are viscerally moved by what happens to one another. Mercy describes an attitude that expresses itself in concrete response. Jesus expressed mercy by doing something for the person in need. Mercy can be understood as affection that springs into action. Having reminded the community of the richness of their Christian experience, Paul calls them to behave as a people who enjoy God's grace in community.

Christians of the 21st century may hear Paul's call to humility as a challenge, but it is hard to grasp how outlandish that sounded to first-century people. If we wanted to translate the cultural impact of his words, we would say "be servile." Humility was considered the virtue of a slave, not a free person. To make the idea palatable if not attractive, Paul went on to describe the attitude he was calling for as the self-giving manner of Christ himself.

What follows in the hymn about Christ presents an absolutely iconoclastic image of God. Paul reminds the community that Christ always shared the divine nature; he was in the form of God. But, says Paul, that dignity wasn't of the sort that it could be grasped or held onto. In fact, according to what Paul has learned from knowing Christ, being in the form of divinity necessarily implied that Christ would empty himself. Paul does not describe God as all-powerful, all-knowing, etc., but all-self-giving.

Christ's compassion, his solidarity with humanity was such that he took on everything that was human so that humanity could see what we are invited to become.

The great revelation of Christ's divinity is precisely his total gift of self. Although Paul didn't have a developed theology of the Trinity, here we see the germ of understanding God as a community of persons totally given to one another.

The other side of that revelation is that in his humanity Christ revealed the truth about the divine destiny of creation. No one can reach God through grasping. But just as Christ emptied himself, so too the Christian community begins to experience union with God by living in a community of love such as Paul described in the opening verses of this reading. Like mercy which is affect in action, a person must practice the attitude of Christ in order to begin to comprehend it.

## **MATTHEW 21:28-32**

As we follow Matthew's Gospel, the Lectionary skips over Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem and moves us directly into his final teachings. We are now in the final section of the Gospel, so we can imagine the teachings we will be hearing from now until the end of the year as taking place during Holy Week.

Jesus tells today's parable immediately after a debate with the chief priests and elders. When they challenged his authority, Jesus asked them to make a public statement about their opinion of John the Baptist. When they refused to be trapped into telling the truth, Jesus refused to answer their questions about himself. He told this parable instead.

Jesus addressed the parable to the very folks who had avoided his question about John. This time they got caught in his trap; they listened to the parable and ended up with no decent escape from his final question. A parable of a man with two sons started them off in familiar territory — that plotline had begun with Adam and went through Abraham and Isaac and on through their own experience. It could have even resonated with the comparison of John and Jesus. But, Jesus took the idea and developed it in his own style, making the turning point the punch that would expose the real situation of his audience.

If we interpret the parable in its cultural context it is more complex than it appears at first glance.

Culturally, the first son was a rude rebel. In a society where saving face was highly valued, the son who said "I will not," wounded his father's dignity and shattered his family's reputation. He effectively put himself outside the family circle. In contrast, the second son honored the father, even to the point of addressing him as "lord." Any observer would have seen that son as exceeding the ideal of filial respect.

Then comes the twist. The deferential son had only a veneer of respect for his father. He might keep things pleasant in the house, but the family business would fall apart under his do-nothing lifestyle. The insolent son actually demonstrated more family commitment than his hypocritical brother. Far from perfect, he was the one who repented. (The word translated as "changed his mind" is translated as repent in other passages and comes from the same root as *metanoia*.)

With this parable, Jesus pointed out the distinction between what might be called orthodoxy and orthopraxis, between saying the right thing and doing the right thing. His implication was that saying the right thing, following the rubrics, can become nothing more than a façade, leaving a people who look good but accomplish nothing for God. In contrast, doing the right thing will lead to understanding what is right and being able to say it as well.

# Planning: 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

Our first reading today voices a common complaint among human beings: “It’s not fair!” From the time we are toddlers, we seem to have an instinct for what seems fair and just, and we protest loudly when we feel we are not being treated fairly.

This is a valuable instinct, for many of the evils of the world flow from unfair exercise of power. For example, we know that some people and some nations take far more than their fair share of the world’s resources. And we need a sense of fairness and justice in the business world to avoid unscrupulous practices that undermine our social contract.

When it comes to how God deals with us, however, that instinct is less useful. When are we ever in a position to complain that God is unfair? All that we have in life is gift.

Before God, we have no right to anything, much less the right to insist that God act according to our sense of fairness. God is love, and love always goes beyond what is fair.

That’s a lesson that all of us need to take to heart. As people called to serve the church community, we must embrace the attitude of Christ, who “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” and “humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

There is always a temptation to claim ownership of our efforts, which can lead us to become too protective of our own ideas and dismissive of others’ suggestions. The liturgy never belongs to the planners or other parish leaders. On the one hand, it is a treasure handed on to us from previous generations of believers and shared by the worldwide church. On the other hand, it is the action of the whole assembly, whose importance should never be minimized.

Those who take leadership roles in the liturgy must always remember that they are servants of the community. And that service will sometimes lead to opposition or, more commonly, minimal recognition of our efforts. We may be tempted to think, or even say aloud, “It’s not fair! I work so hard and nobody appreciates me!” That’s

when we need to remind ourselves (or each other) that we do not carry out our ministry in order to get recognition. We do it in imitation of Christ, who offered his life for others without expecting appreciation or reward. His resurrection, of course, shows us that God does not ignore our sacrifices but wants to raise us up too, when the times comes for us to share fully in Christ's resurrected life.

Care of Creation: Wednesday is the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, a good day to gather folks for a prayer service for our common home, as Pope Francis calls the Earth. If that's not workable, at least be sure to include petitions for creation care in the intercessions this weekend.

## **Planning: 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

By: Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

Who is truly righteous? In today's readings, as throughout the Gospel, it isn't always who we might think. Appearances may deceive us, and we shouldn't compare ourselves with others. There is hope for those of us who recognize our mistakes, rely on God's mercy, and make changes. Self-emptying seems outdated in our current culture fascinated with celebrity, hubris and arrogance. But as followers of Jesus, we are called to examine our own lives and walk in humility. God is waiting for us there.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you welcomed tax collectors and prostitutes: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you showed us how to live in humility: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to follow your example of self-emptying: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** We pray now for ourselves, for all who are deemed unworthy, and for the entire world.

**Minister** For the whole church: That we may be a humble, self-emptying people ... we pray,



- For radical openness to outsiders, especially those we consider unworthy ... we pray,
- For the ability to recognize our own judgement about others, knowing that we all need God's mercy ... we pray,
- For those who have no sense of their own worth, and for the ability to instill both a sense of self-worth and humility in our children and youth... we pray,
- For those whose arrogance causes pain for others, or for those who have forgotten or have contempt for the ones most in need in our society ... we pray,
- For those in this community who are suffering and for a renewed commitment to minister to them ... we pray,
- For the courage and fortitude to respond to Pope Francis' invitation to care for creation ... we pray,

**Presider** God of compassion, we turn to you as citizens of a world that values achievement and success. Help us to remember that you love what is right, just and humble. Make us aware of who we truly are. Show us how to live as you call us to live. We humbly ask this in the name of your beloved Son, Jesus. Amen.

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