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May 13, 2018

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Even though we are in the Easter season, these readings from the Seventh Sunday of Easter draw me back to a particular date in November, specifically Nov. 3. On that day I professed my final vows as a Dominican Sister of Caldwell, New Jersey. On that day some years later, my sister Kathy became engaged to her wonderful husband, Ralph. And on that day this past year, my mom took hold of her granddaughter Jenna's hand, held it tight, looked into her eyes and said, "Don't worry about me; I'll be just fine." Six days later, my mom passed into the embrace of God.

Because of her great love for all of her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, my mother Mary often worried about us and prayed for us every day. Even as she was journeying toward the fullness of our God, she was thinking about us, consoling us and reassuring us that all would be well. Nov. 3 will always be a day about love for me; today's readings are also about love during this Easter season.

We are in post-Resurrection times, but the Lectionary offers us a Gospel reading that looks back on Jesus' last days before his death. In John's Gospel, we listen to Jesus' prayer that he offers to God for his disciples before he makes his final journey to God. Like my mother, Jesus is also concerned about those whom he loves so dearly, who will be left to carry on the work of evangelization and the mission of love. Jesus' prayer captures his deep concern for his beloved ones as he entrusts them to God. My mother passed on; Jesus passed on. Yet, their spirits remain alive in our midst. As we see in the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus' disciples carry on with their lives and their work to fulfill Jesus' vision and mission. Likewise, my family and I continue on with our lives as we try to fulfill the mission and legacy of love entrusted to us by the ones who loved us first.

In the reading from Acts, we see that one of the first orders of business within the community of believers is to choose someone to take the place of Judas Iscariot in the apostolic ministry. The writer of Acts features Peter exercising leadership among some 120 persons gathered in one place. Peter's style of leadership is collaborative. He allows the assembled community to propose two possibilities, the names of which the community then brings to prayer. Only after the community prays does the community then cast lots to make its choice. Matthias becomes one of the Twelve Apostles.

Various verses of Psalm 103 become a fitting response to the reading from Acts. The choice of Matthias was a response to grace received through prayer. Psalm 103 offers noble and serene tones that praise God's grace and benevolence. Within the Psalter, this psalm is clearly identified both as a song of thanksgiving and a hymn of praise. The psalmist

acknowledges God's great love which far outweighs any thought of human transgression. Two poetic metaphors express both of these sentiments. Israel's God is one whose reign and activity center on steadfast love and mercy. This God acts out of compassion and not out of moral calculations. Divine generosity surpasses divine wrath. In Psalm 103, then, the psalmist addresses this God in hymnic glorification.

The reading from the First Letter of John picks up on the theme of love expressed in Psalm 103. God's love for humankind is deep and generous, and the author of 1 John urges his listeners to love one another in the same way that God loves each person. Loving one another as God loves each person is a tangible sign of God's life and presence within the person called to love. Furthermore, Jesus is the expression of God's love par excellence. Those who love remain not only in communion with Jesus but also in union with God. To love as God loves, however, is not easy. For that reason, the writer of John's Gospel features Jesus praying for his disciples as Jesus' own life among them begins to draw to a close.

Thus, Sunday's readings show us that to love others as God loves us is a virtue of divine origin that requires grace to carry out the task. Love is a characteristic of God and a sign of God's life and presence within and among us. Care for the common good through the exercise of collaboration and discernment is necessary when making decisions that will have an impact on furthering the church's apostolic mission. Love at its depths is an invitation to let go to God, knowing that God will be present to all our concerns and will bring all of our efforts to completion.

### **ACTS 1:15-17, 20a, 20c-26**

Following the ascension of Jesus but before the feast of Pentecost, the community of believers in Jerusalem gather together to take care of their first order of business: the replacement of Judas Iscariot so that the disciples can once again be 12 in number. This specific number represents the restoration of the 12 tribes of the people of God. Peter leads the community in the discernment and selection process.

In his opening remarks to his brothers, Peter makes a double reference to the Hebrew Scriptures. The use of references to the Hebrew Scriptures in the Christian Scriptures to make the point of the Scriptures being fulfilled is a prominent feature of primitive Christian testimony and apologetic. Even before the time of Jesus, some of the material in the Psalter was being interpreted in a messianic sense. Furthermore, for those who believed that Jesus was the Messiah of David's line, the experiences of the psalmist were to be understood as prophetically applicable to Jesus. Such was the way Scripture was sometimes interpreted in the early church.

Not just anyone could become one of the Twelve Apostles. A person had to fulfill certain criteria. First, Judas' successor had to be someone who was associated with Jesus throughout his ministry. Second, the person had to be a witness to Jesus' resurrection. Cognizant of this criteria, the community proposes two candidates: Judas called Barabbas who was also known as Justus, and Matthias.

After surfacing two names, the community then enters into prayer in order to discern which person God, who knows the hearts of all, has chosen. The final step in the process is the casting of lots which was a traditional means within Judaism to determine God's "will" (Leviticus 16:8; Jonah 1:7-8). Before Pentecost when the Spirit would take the lead, the early church sought the direction of God and used an ancient Hebrew Scripture procedure to secure a divine decision.

Nothing about Judas' death is clear. The Christian Scripture offers two versions of it. The writer of Matthew's Gospel states that Judas repented, returned the money to the Jewish leaders, and then hanged himself. The writer of Luke's Gospel states that Judas jumped head first to a violent fall. Some scholars contend that the whole account of Judas' death is legendary. Whatever the case may be, the community casts its lot for Matthias. The process of selection is collaborative and prayerful. A similar process still happens when religious communities choose new leadership.

### **PSALMS 103:1-2, 11-12, 19-20**

A new member has been added to the company of Apostles who once numbered 11 and now number 12. Psalm 103 becomes a fitting response to the first reading from Acts, and we can imagine the 120 persons who are gathered together now bursting into song at the conclusion of their discernment process.

Psalm 103 incorporates elements of hymns of praise and songs of thanksgiving. The psalm opens with a classic call to praise found in the Psalter, followed by many reasons for the praise. The call to praise takes the form of an exhortation to bless the Lord. Here, the psalmist calls upon his soul — his entire being — to bless the Lord. “Soul” refers to the life force found within a person and all creatures. By extension, “soul” refers to the whole person; it is the seat of emotions.

“To bless” was a common gesture in the ancient world. God, angels and humanity may bless. Humanity, animals and inanimate objects can be blessed. For the most part, blessing is a performative utterance, or speech act that brings good upon someone or something. God repeatedly blesses individuals (Job 42:12), groups (Exodus 32:29), and nations (Jeremiah 4:2) — especially Israel (Deuteronomy 26:15). Now the psalmist calls upon himself to bless God for all God’s graciousness and compassion.

To capture the breadth of God’s love and the wideness of God’s mercy, the psalmist uses two metaphors in the second stanza. The psalmist makes the point that God’s immense kindness is toward those who fear God. Divine compassion far outweighs human transgression (Micah 7:18-20). In the ancient biblical tradition, “to fear” means “to love.”

In the last stanza of the psalm, the psalmist reinforces the ancient idea that Israel saw its God as Lord of creation and Lord of history. The call to bless the Lord now moves from the individual sphere to the communal sphere. Heavenly beings are to bless the Lord whose reign is universal and cosmic. Thus, God’s steadfast love can be as great as the heavens are high above the earth because God’s throne is established in the heavens. This God can remove transgressions as far as the east is from the west because God’s kingdom rules overall.

Finally, important to note here is the point that even though the model of God presented is a royal, patriarchal and hierarchical one, benevolence is the primary characteristic of this ruling “monarch.” This royal image of God is typical of the wisdom tradition of which the psalms are a part.

## **1 JOHN 4:11-16**

This reading from the First Letter of John flows nicely from the responsorial psalm. Having joined our voices with the psalmist’s voice to bless the Lord because of God’s graciousness, the writer of John’s letter now offers a profound directive and instruction. This portion of the letter opens with the warm signature address “beloved.” The Johannine community knows itself to be the beloved of God and also understands itself as a place of unique relationships. Here, the Johannine community is being encouraged to live a life of love characterized by mutuality.

For us hearing this reading, we are being called to love one another because God has loved us first. If we say that we love God, then we have no other choice but to love one another especially because God loves each person and us. This sacred Presence we call “God” is pure mystery, one that can never be fully grasped or understood in the here and now, and one that is pure Spirit beyond all of our earthly and tangible metaphors. Love is what makes this sacred Presence real and the Spirit felt. This quality of loving one another belongs to the distinctiveness of Johannine Christianity, stems from the Johannine Christ (John 13:34-35), represents a potential antidote for the schism within the early church at this time, and becomes the cornerstone for faithful discipleship.

The call is to “love one another” and not “others.” Loving one another implies a spirit and experience of reciprocity. This notion of reciprocity leads to mutuality. Those who love participate in the life of God whose Spirit has been poured out within and among all creation (Wisdom of Solomon 11:24—12:1). Hence, this Spirit of God, this spirit of love, is what joins God to us, us to God, us to one another, and us to the indwelling God in each other.

The reference to the Father sending Jesus as the savior of the world is a central Johannine Christological motif. This confessional statement appears earlier in John’s Gospel (John 4:42). Salvation in 1 John encompasses the presence of love, the loss of fear, the gift of eternal life, and the expiation of sin. To acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God — the Holy One of God sent by God — is to confess to the lived reality of God’s love in what was an unbelieving world at the time that this letter was being written.

God’s actions, as heard earlier in Psalm 103, and now in relation to the sending of Jesus as the world’s savior — whose primary ministry was to liberate humankind from all oppression, inclusive of sin, are all a testimony to divine love made manifest in the midst of creation.

The letter concludes with a simple yet profound statement: “God is love” which means that God is the source of love. To abide in love is to abide in God. If a person abides in God, then God abides in that person also. To be Christian, then, is to embrace a life of love as exemplified by Christ. Such a life may cost us not less than everything, but according to John’s letter, it is the way into full union with God as we grow into deeper communion with Christ.

## **JOHN 17:11b-19**

As the Gospel of John starts to draw to a close and the death of Jesus becomes more imminent, the Gospel writer features Jesus praying to God. This prayer is part of Jesus’ last address to his disciples that he began at the Passover meal in John 13. The prayer begins in John 17:1 and concludes in John 17:26. How hard it must have been for Jesus to realize that soon he would no longer be with those whom he loved so dearly. Jesus has no other recourse at this point in time except to entrust his disciples to God — the same God who is the source of his own great love. This God is the reason why Jesus has done all that he has and will be able to endure single-heartedly all that lies ahead of him.

Jesus opens his prayer with the address “Holy Father.” This expression is based upon a fundamental Hebrew concept of the holiness of God (2 Maccabees 14:36;

3 Maccabees 2:2). According to the Gospel tradition, Jesus understands himself to be the son of David, and in keeping with the divine covenant established with David, God and David have what is likened to a father-son relationship (2 Samuel 7:14). Jesus is heir to this relationship which is expressed in metaphorical terms here and in the story of David.

What Jesus wants for his disciples is what he enjoys with God — union. Jesus also wants God to protect the disciples just as he protected them for as long as he has been with them. Finally, he wants God to consecrate them in the truth. For Jesus, God’s word is truth. Here, “word” refers to the message received from God. To be “consecrated” is to be set apart for mission. By participating fully in Jesus’ mission, the disciples will share deeply in the life experience of Jesus and come to know what oneness with God really means. Jesus’ heartfelt prayer is poignant because he knows what the disciples will have to face for the sake of love.

Thus, this Sunday’s readings speak about the characteristics, the cost and rewards of love. Love may involve loss and letting go as it did for my family, Jesus and the early disciples. Yet, the mission of love must continue if God is to continue to be made known in our world whose deepest hunger is for incarnational love.

# **Planning: 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**

**By: Lawrence Mick**

For most parishes in the U. S. and Canada (and elsewhere), the Seventh Sunday of Easter is replaced by the Solemnity of the Ascension. There are some choices to be made for readings and prayers. The Missal has a separate set of prayers for a Vigil Mass on Saturday (or last Wednesday if your diocese celebrates Ascension on Thursday). The Lectionary does not offer different readings for a Vigil Mass, so only the presider needs to be reminded of this option. The Lectionary for Cycle B does have options for the second reading, however. The first one printed in the Lectionary is the same as Cycle A. A second option is offered from Ephesians, and it has both a long form and a short form. Consult with your preachers to see which texts are preferred and then let the lectors know well in advance so they can prepare.

The meaning of this feast may still be misunderstood by many people. It does not commemorate the day that Jesus left our world behind. He promised to remain with us always, and Jesus is present now in different ways than before his death and resurrection. This might be a good day for some mystagogical catechesis on the various ways that Christ is present in the Eucharist. The Second Vatican Council (and the Missal which followed it) reminded us that Christ is present in the assembly, in the presider, in the word proclaimed and in the bread and wine transformed into his body and blood.

Planners might spend a bit of time discussing how well each of these is recognized by your parishioners. You might discern this more by behavior than by verbal questioning. How well do people recognize Christ in one another as they gather for worship? How do they respond when the presider seeks to lead them in full participation in the liturgy? How

attentive are they to the readings and homily — does it seem like they are listening to Christ himself? How reverently do they share in the sacred meal and how well do they express their unity with everyone else who shares the body and blood (e.g., by singing together and standing until the communion procession is finished)? The conclusions of your discernment might be shared with the preachers to suggest what needs attention in the homily.

**Mother's Day:** Today is also Mother's Day in the U. S. and Canada and dozens of other countries. Mothers should not be the primary focus of liturgy today, but they shouldn't be ignored, either. The Book of Blessings offers petitions that can be included in the general intercessions (choose one or two) and a blessing formula for the end of Mass (#1727-28). For parishes serving a Mexican American population, take note: In Mexico, Mother's Day or "Día de las Madres" is celebrated annually on May 10.

## Prayers: 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

By: Joan DeMerchant

### Introduction

This feast is not about bidding farewell to Jesus, but about the hand-off of his work to us. It didn't take long for the early church to figure that out, but the question is whether we got the message. The healing of our broken world is not yet completed. Others may do their part, but they can't do the work that is uniquely ours. Each one of us is called to be his voice, hands and feet in the world.

### Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you sent the disciples into the whole world to proclaim the Gospel: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you gave them power to continue your redemptive work: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to do your work that still remains to be done: Lord, have mercy.

### Prayer of the Faithful

**Presider** Let us pray, my friends, for all who are called to continue Jesus' redemptive work in the world.

**Minister** For every baptized Christian: that we may be willing to do the work Jesus calls us to do, however and wherever we can ... we pray,

- For those called to live the Gospel in challenging situations without the support of others; for courage when it is most needed ... we pray,
- For our Muslim brothers and sisters, who begin the sacred penitential season of Ramadan this week — especially those living under suspicion, prejudice or violence ... we pray,
- For all mothers and for all women who nurture others on this Mother's Day; for those mothers who live with the loss or estrangement of their children, or the pain of being unable to bear children ... we pray,
- For the growth of our parish ministries that continue Jesus' healing, redemptive work to those in need both here and across the world; and for those who most need his loving care ... we pray,

**Presider** Empowering God, we have been called to demonstrate Jesus' presence in this time and place and to continue his ongoing work. The need is great, but the charge is sometimes overwhelming. Grant us the vision, courage and will to respond to whatever task is ours. We ask this in his holy name. Amen.

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