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### [Scripture for Life](#)



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Teachers of deaf children explain that when a child with a severe hearing impairment closes her eyes, she effectively cuts off all communication from the outside. With a distinct advantage over hearing children who must just pretend they don't see or hear, she can prevent any new information from penetrating her world. She's the miniature image of the scribes of today's Gospel who accused Jesus of wielding diabolical power. They had made their judgment and they would allow nothing — no good works, no life-giving message, no joy — to penetrate their consciousness and modify their opinion. They knew sinful activity when they saw it!

Jesus called that attitude blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. It's an equal opportunity sin, as attractive to entrenched liberals as to their mirror-image, die-hard conservative brothers and sisters. It's a form of idolatry through which we divinize our own opinion or dogma, refusing to allow God or anyone to break through to broaden our vision.

Jesus calls this unforgiveable because people who willingly imprison themselves in an ideology wall themselves off from grace and initiate their own rigor mortis. It's a vicious cycle malady, self-reinforcing because they interpret any question that could give them a key to freedom as a temptation to be rigidly avoided. Jesus' condemnation of that sort of attitude was the harshest critique he spoke in the Gospels. He directed it at people who had so entrapped themselves that they would only go from bad to worse, eventually plotting his crucifixion.

The scribes who blasphemed against the Holy Spirit were the extremists in today's Gospel. The other group whose misjudgment we hear about, a group which may have caused Jesus at least as much sorrow, was his family. It's hard to imagine what they were going through. Jesus, the son and brother who had apparently seemed like an average son of Joe had suddenly become a controversial public figure and was angering the big and small-time authorities. They must have had some sort of family meeting that resulted in the troupe of relatives who set off to find him and bring him home to his senses.

The family got as far as the door of the house where Jesus was staying, but instead of going inside, they remained as outsiders and sent a message that they were seeking him. Mark sets this up to show us that they weren't so much seeking Jesus as looking for a way to convince him to get back to normal. They had their idea about who he should be as a member of the family and he was not conforming. The problem they were grappling with is key to the Gospel: Do you accept Jesus on his terms or will you only accept a Messiah who fulfills your expectations?

Jesus responded to his family like representatives of all of Israel awaiting the Christ. He proclaimed that his closest ties were not forged by blood or heritage, nor by formal religious affiliation or nationality. He said his real kin were those who related to God in the same way that he did. They were the people who gave him life and whom he would protect as he would protect his mother, the people whom he could treat as co-heirs with him to everything the Father promised. They shared the real source of life with him.

Today we are invited to put ourselves in the Gospel scene and decide with whom we would be standing. We might be inside the house listening to Jesus, wondering what it is all about, worried that we will have to take a stand. Some of us might admit that we are at least occasionally trapped with the dogmatic demonizers who say, “Nothing will change my mind.” Others might be with the family who just can’t believe God would want things to change so much and therefore, are praying that everything can just get back to normal.

No matter which group we identify with, Mark tells us this story to show that Jesus offers us a place in the inner circle. Becoming a part of that circle will demand that we drop all claim to importance based on race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, profession, economic status, etc. We also have to learn to grasp our certainties loosely, willing to let additional revelation upend them and us. As Pope Francis said in July 2016, we are called to give up “all motives of personal pride, of careerism or hunger for power ... becoming humble instruments of salvation worked by Jesus’ own sacrifice.” When we do that, we will stop resembling the children who try to blot out reality by closing their eyes and covering their ears. Only then will we be able to hear the Lord call us brother, sister, mother, friend.

## **GENESIS 3:9-15**

The Genesis narrative about Adam and Eve in the garden is like a child’s tale in which some profound messages are hidden for the adults. We know the general background, but the details open up diverse and often much deeper interpretations.

This story is from a section of Genesis (2:4–11:9) that begins with the “second” creation account which is much more anthropomorphic than that of Chapter 1 in Genesis in which God creates each day and its produce with nothing but words (1:1-2:3). In this account, after fashioning Adam from the clay and giving him the garden of Eden, God only gave him one prohibition: He was not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Then, seeing that Adam was lonely, God formed creatures and paraded them before Adam to name — all of which was fine, but none was a worthy companion for Adam. So, God fashioned Eve — now, not from the earth, but from human stock.

All was well until the serpent came to Eve who had presumably heard about the forbidden tree from Adam. Eve’s temptation was really a dilemma about whether to believe Adam or the serpent. Unfortunately, she chose the serpent even though she had already caught it in a gross exaggeration about God’s moral demands (Genesis 3:1-2). Eve ate from the tree because the serpent said it would make her like a god. “She saw that the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eyes, and the tree was desirable for gaining wisdom” (Genesis 3:6). She gave some of the fruit to Adam, and he ate it as well. Our story picks up just after Adam and Eve’s eyes were opened and they saw that they were naked.

What was that all about? Nudity was no new experience, after all, they hadn’t dressed up for their sinful snack. When we hear Adam’s response to God’s call, we realize that the problem couldn’t really have been nudity; he had never known any other state. But now for the first time in his life he felt he had something to hide. So, in addition to the fig leaves he and Eve had donned, he hid behind her, protesting that she had been his supplier and blaming God for putting her there. Eve followed suit, but had no one to blame except the serpent, and so it would be forever more.

What are we to make of this reading on the 10th Sunday in Ordinary Time? Why was it chosen to complement today’s Gospel about misjudging Jesus? The story tries to explain that sin came into the world as a result of lack of faith in God’s word and providence. Eve fell for devious propaganda. The serpent said she could be like a god, cunningly causing her to forget that she had been created in the divine image. The serpent had succeeded in launching the first false advertising campaign in history.

What it said of the fruit was the prehistoric version of televised promises that the right makeup, deodorant or auto will make us attractive or that a particular drug or credit card will give us security. The tale also reveals how buying into such false guarantees breeds shame, then blame and division. Genesis teaches us that once the death-dealing power of the lie has been unleashed, all other evil will follow in its wake.

## **PSALMS 130:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8**

It is not often that we pray a psalm in its entirety as part of the Liturgy of the Word, but we do that with Psalm 130 in Lent, on All Souls Day and this Sunday. This psalm has two parts: the first a plea for mercy and the second a proclamation of God's loving kindness.

We might pray the first two stanzas in chorus with Adam and Eve as representatives of the entire human race. With them, we admit that we are all sinners in need of forgiveness. The end of verse four, which praises God's forgiveness as a motive for reverence, reminds us that to be godlike is to forgive.

The second half of the psalm prepares us for the Gospel call to openness, to God's "plenteous redemption." This reminds us that God's plan is always larger than our heart or imagination.

## **2 CORINTHIANS 4:13–5:1**

After months of Lent, Easter and the solemnities of the past two weeks, we return to Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians and pick up well after it has begun. In today's selection, part of a larger section dealing with his ministry among the Corinthians, Paul is dealing with questions of death and life, suffering and glory, all in the context of his vivid faith in Christ's resurrection. Our disadvantage in reading this is that we are picking up in the middle of the conversation, some of which is available in earlier parts of the letter and some of which deals with details of relationships that we can only guess at.

As our selection opens, Paul tells the reader that we are united with him and our Israelite ancestors in the same spirit of faith. He indicates that anyone who really has faith is impelled to speak. Christian believers simply can't be silent about the mystery of Christ which Paul summarizes here as the assurance that all believers will inherit a share in Christ's resurrection.

This passage turns out to be one more reflection on a core tenet of Paul's faith: Christ's resurrection radically changes everything. Because we are destined to share eternal life with Christ, everything in this life takes its meaning from that. Paul wants us to live toward what we know about our future and to allow that to permeate our present and interpret our past. Not only that, but no suffering or physical diminishment can do anything but enhance our capacity for the glory to come. What Paul is trying to communicate here is the mystery he has come to accept as the meaning of his own life. He believes so much in the goodness God has in store that every moment of life, every relationship, every experience, takes on eternal significance in the light of that future.

## **MARK 3:20-35**

Today's Gospel portrays a pretty shocking two-part scene from the life of Christ. Beginning with an incident unique to Mark's Gospel, Jesus' family comes to the conclusion that he's gone crazy. Their evidence? He's gained fame as an exorcist and a healer who will touch women; he lays hands on lepers, eats with known sinners, proclaims forgiveness, disregards pious fasting practices, and provokes the wrath of religious authorities by openly violating Sabbath restrictions. He does all of this while preaching repentance and announcing that the kingdom of God is at hand.

At the very least, this extraordinary behavior put Jesus in danger and reflected very poorly on his kin. But the family's opinion paled in the light of the scribes' verdict: "He is possessed by Beelzebul." (According to the Dictionary of the Bible, Beelzebul could be translated as "Lord of the Flies" and began as a contemptuous mispronunciation of the name of a Philistine god later designated as a demon.) Jesus' response to both his family and his adversaries explained his activities and the plan he has in mind.

First of all, Jesus confronts the scribes' charge of possession. Refusing to credit the mysterious Beelzebul, he deals directly with the insinuation that he's satanic. He calls the scribes' bluff asking, "Can Satan drive out Satan?" The obvious implication is that the worst thing of which he might be culpable is instigating a coup in hell. He then goes a step further and outlines his mission. He explains that through his practice of exorcism he's binding up the devil and plundering his possessions.

While the cleverness of Jesus' replies must have brought some delighted chuckles from the onlookers, the interchange is not without real anger. That emotion stands out in the harshest statement Jesus makes in any of the Gospels: "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never have forgiveness."

This statement seems terribly out of character from Jesus who ate with sinners and called everyone to conversion. What is this unforgivable sin? According to the Jesuit theologian Juan Luis Segundo, "The real sin against the Holy Spirit is refusing to recognize, with 'theological joy,' some concrete liberation that is taking place before one's very eyes." In other words, the unforgivable sin is the refusal to acknowledge that God is at work in what gives life, heals or frees human beings.

The scribes in this incident, like the Pharisees in John 9:40-41, refused to be open to new revelation. Assuming the role of God, they declared that Jesus could not possibly be revealing the divine because, in spite of the life-giving works he performed, he did not fit their categories or follow their interpretation of the law. Their blasphemy was that they had divinized their theology. As long as they maintained that position, they kept themselves safe from any disturbance by the Holy Spirit and the possibility of change and forgiveness.

This interchange was hardly finished when Mark tells us that his mother and brothers had arrived to take him in hand. Mark makes it very clear that Jesus was in a house with his disciples, and the family was outside that circle when they arrived and were asking for him. In response, Jesus broke another cultural norm and said that his family would no longer be defined by blood, but by behavior, by the heart rather than heritage.

The issues of family and the judgment of the scribes were distinct facets of the same theme. Jesus assumed the freedom to reinterpret religious practices in order to fulfill their life-giving purpose. He opened up kinship and community thus making relationship with him a matter of commitment rather than ethnicity.

Jesus' entire ministry was about making the kingdom of God available to everyone. He believed in the future and the ongoing inspiration of the Spirit and thus could not be controlled by the past. The community he was forming had no limits and therefore, no one had special access to him except through accepting his message and putting it into practice.

## **Planning: 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**By: Lawrence Mick**

It's summer and this Sunday we go back to the green vestments of Ordinary Time. Are you breathing a sigh of relief after getting through Lent and Easter and the last two Sunday solemnities? It's a natural and healthy response. We can't ignore the liturgies of Ordinary Time, of course. Every liturgy takes some planning and preparation, but Ordinary Time is less demanding than the special seasons.

Just taking time to relax is appropriate for planners and other liturgical leaders. But this relaxed time offers us the opportunity to renew ourselves spiritually, too.

In today's second reading, Paul says, "Therefore, we are not discouraged; rather, although our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day." What a wonderful thought — that our inner selves might be renewed day by day! Sometimes the press of duties upon liturgical leaders can seem to do the opposite, draining our spirits rather than renewing them.

Take some time this summer for quiet prayer, for time spent in the presence of the Lord, for time to renew your love for God and your awareness of God's immense love for you. We need to do this throughout the year, of course, but perhaps the summer allows more space for it, making this a precious time for spiritual renewal.

In today's Gospel, Jesus gives us a clue to the goal of our spiritual life. "For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." Spiritual growth is a matter of aligning our will with God's will. Time that we spend in God's presence can deepen our awareness of God's will for us and for the world God has created.

In the hustle and bustle of daily life, it is often hard to stay aware of what God has in mind for us and for others. To live each day in love, to seek the good of all rather than our selfish desires, is only possible if we are united with the love of God. Our time of prayer and reflection can attune our hearts to the heart of God, which can sustain us in our efforts to make our lives reflect God's will in all things.

Beyond personal time this summer, planners might consider a day or even a few days of communal retreat to encourage each other to enter into this kind of spiritual renewal. Is that possible for at least some of your liturgical leaders? It could be a formal type of retreat with a retreat leader, but it could also just be time away from daily duties when you can share together your own spiritual journey and insights.

## Prayers: 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

### Introduction

The arc to redemption is not without conflict, suffering, division or challenge. Its meaning is premised on mercy overcoming what is incomplete or fractured. This has been borne out throughout history, including in Jesus' own life. When we encounter darkness or failure, we know this is not the last word. By God's unending love and mercy, and we are called to extend it to others.

### Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, You were challenged by religious authorities and your own family: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, You exercised your authority by the power of the Spirit: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, You said that those who do God's will are your family: Lord, have mercy.

### Prayer of the Faithful

**Presider** Let us pray, brothers and sisters, for all people suffering because of broken relationships.

**Minister** For the whole church: That we may collectively demonstrate God's salvific love and mercy to all people ... we pray,

- For those who are overcome by discouragement or guilt — who do not believe that they are loved and forgiven ... we pray,
- For those who too easily condemn others; and for those who are unjustly denigrated or condemned ... we pray,
- For prisoners, for those who work in prisons, and for humane prison policies and conditions ... we pray,
- For those whose work is dedicated to attaining justice for the unjustly accused; and for a serious review of the death penalty ... we pray,
- For the courage to examine our own attitudes toward punishment and forgiveness, and the will to witness as a parish to God's love and mercy ... we pray,

**Presider** God of mercy, help us to remember your loving presence in the darkest moments of our lives. Show us how to extend your loving mercy to all whom we encounter, especially those we consider unworthy. We pray in Christ's holy name. Amen.

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