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A number of years ago, I was invited to translate for a U.S. diocesan delegation visiting their sister diocese in Bolivia. At one point, I was helping a reporter interview members of a youth group about their hopes and plans. After we finished, Kevin, the reporter said to me, “I have never heard anything like this!” Perplexed, I asked what he was talking about. He said, “I kept asking these kids what they wanted to do in the future, and each one started out saying something like, ‘My people need health care, so I want to be a doctor,’ or, ‘My people need education, so I want to prepare to teach in the university.’ I have never heard college students in the U.S. explain their plans in relation to the needs of our people.”

Today’s readings start out with Jeremiah’s rendition of his own call to be a prophet — an incident in which he learned something new about God, about himself and about God’s ideas for how he would spend the rest of his life.

When God said, “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you,” Jeremiah realized that he was hearing from the Creator of the universe, the One who formed humanity in the divine image. That introduction revealed to Jeremiah that God was as close to him as his own mother and loving and powerful enough to fashion him for what he could become. This revelation also informed Jeremiah that everything God had done for him was not simply for himself and not only for his own people but for the sake of all the nations.

Surely, Jeremiah was a role model for Jesus. Jesus’ baptismal experience of God’s call assured him of God’s love and joy in who he was. When it came time for Jesus to delineate the specific aims of his mission, he explained that God had called him to something broader than prophecy. Jesus knew that he was called to be and proclaim good news for everyone labeled as outcast.

Both Jeremiah and Jesus were headed for trouble precisely because God had set their sights on a panorama much wider and a faithfulness much deeper than their contemporaries wanted to consider. Jeremiah would go on to be persecuted by being put in the stocks in the Temple, thrown into a cistern to die of starvation, and exiled to Egypt. Jesus must have been aware of that as he explained to his hometown what he was called to do.

The Gospel of Luke neglects to explain exactly why Jesus' own people turned on him so quickly after he described his mission. It seems that they went wild as soon as he made it clear that his vocation was to care for the outcast.

Their question, "Isn't this the son of Joseph?" sounds like they were saying that he thought too much of himself; after all, he was just one of them. Additionally, Jesus' description of his call to serve people on the margins was a double insult to them. First, it suggested that they were not living up to their vocation to care for the needy. Secondly, Jesus was telling them that God's first concern was not for them, but for those whom they and others had left behind. In sum, this "son of Joseph" was saying that, more than the chosen people, the poor were God's priority.

Luke set this story up as a brief summary of his Gospel. It portrays Jesus' call, his rejection, and the fact that nothing could overcome him. In addition to describing the conflicts inherent in preaching the Gospel, the story subtly tells us what Jesus believed about God. Jesus knew God as the God of Israel; he pointed that out by referring to the history of Elijah and Elisha. But Jesus also knew that God had never called the chosen people for their own sake, but rather to be a sign to the nations, an example of what it means to live God's plan for the world.

These readings bring us to ask ourselves why we call ourselves Christians. Are we in this to benefit ourselves and our native place? If so, we will eventually be motivated to join with the people of Nazareth who wanted to get rid of Jesus and his inconvenient, seemingly no-win approach to religion. But if we believe we are called to be reflections of the God who created everyone in the divine image, we will follow Jeremiah and Jesus in lives consecrated to the good of the whole world.

Like Jeremiah and Jesus, those young people who talked to Kevin in Bolivia are a sign to us. They challenge us to make our plans based on what we have been given and what our world most needs.

**JEREMIAH 1:4-5, 17-19**

Psalm 139, probably written more than 100 years after the time of Jeremiah, echoes Jeremiah's call story and puts his sentiments in the mouth of anyone willing to pray it. It describes God's intimate knowledge of each of us saying, "You formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother's womb." But God's message to Jeremiah goes a bit further than Psalm 139; it deals with the ups and downs of the life of someone in intimate contact with God and dedicated to bringing God's word to the world.

The opening verses of today's scriptural selection have a two-pronged purpose. First, they portray Jeremiah's own sense of personal call by God. In his original experience of being called, Jeremiah heard that God's intimacy with him started when God began the creative work of forming him from the first instant of his existence. Along with that, God let him know that from the moment of his conception he was being prepared and consecrated to be a prophet for the world. That was Jeremiah's personal revelation. The second purpose of these verses was to establish Jeremiah's public reputation, to let his listeners know that whether or not they appreciated his message, he was speaking for God; God had chosen and dedicated him for that very purpose.

The verses skipped by the Roman Lectionary fill out God's explanation of the mission and Jeremiah's ineffective protest against receiving such a difficult vocation. In response to Jeremiah's protest, God simply says, "Gird up your loins," in other words, "Prepare yourself for conflict."

This gives us a preview of Jeremiah's entire vocation. From the very start, God made it clear that Jeremiah would not have an easy time of it. The difficulties sprang from the fact that Jeremiah would be speaking for the God who was rejected or ignored by the people. God promised, "I place my words in your mouth" (Jeremiah 1:9) and went on with the order: "Stand up and tell them all that I command you." Jeremiah would eventually claim that God had so seduced him that God's word was like a fire in his heart (20:9). Unfortunately, the God who promised to give him words to speak did not promise to fight on his behalf. Instead, God said only that when others would fight Jeremiah, they would not prevail over him.

### **PSALM 71:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 15-17**

As we pray this psalm, we can be mindful of the struggles encountered by anyone who aspires to be faithful to our baptismal call to be prophets. While the refrain is a

proclamation of faith, each verse asks God to fulfill the hope faith engenders. This is an apt prayer for anyone who believes God has called her and yet knows how difficult it will be to proclaim God's truth to her people.

The first verse is particularly poignant if we imagine that the prophet praying it is a woman. Although men are subject to being humiliated, society tends to make women's reputations both more vulnerable and more decisive in judging the value of what they say and do. From biblical times to the present, men in power have been able to dismiss the testimony of women, often shaming them in order to discount what they have to say. Anyone who has been dishonored, discriminated against or rejected can understand this verse as it begs God to stand with the victim.

The second stanza moves from defenseless plea into a stance of greater confidence. All the while, the psalmist centers his confidence in God alone.

The third stanza takes another step forward in faithful trust. Now the psalmist can say to God, "You are my hope." This stanza invites us to look back at moments of life when we have recognized God's grace active in leading us forward through difficult times. It reminds us that God has known and loved and called us since before we were born.

The final stanza, like so many songs of praise, promises that we who pray will give witness to God's goodness and salvation. It recapitulates the whole psalm and repeats the promise of the refrain. By the time we come to the end of the psalm, we realize that the promise to sing about God's salvation has a triple effect. First, as a song of thanks, it brings us joy. Secondly, singing of God's saving work actually becomes a work of evangelization. Finally, the activity of remembering and praising makes us more keenly aware of God's presence and thus brings us more deeply into a dynamic relationship through which God can answer our prayer.

## **1 CORINTHIANS 12:31—13:13**

If we did a survey about the most beloved or most used passages from Paul's writings, this selection would win hands down. A frequent choice for weddings and funerals, people often refer to it as Paul's hymn to love. Despite the way many interpret it today, Paul probably wrote this passage to critique the Corinthians and their cherished spiritual gifts. He was elaborating on the idea that they had turned genuine religiosity inside out and made it a charade by doing what they did without love.

Paul is not criticizing the various gifts people in the community have received. Gifts come from the Spirit: They are good in origin — as is all of creation. But unless the gifts are expressions and extensions of love, they are being perverted, and the people who exercise them are making themselves irrelevant at best or even enemies of the Christian cause.

As he has done in other places (Philippians 3, Acts 23), Paul emphasizes the fact that he shares his readers' background: He too has spoken in tongues and is a prophet. He is not overly subtle as he lets his audiences know that he can match them gift-for-gift on just about any section of their résumé. But he also puts himself in line for being called on the carpet as he speaks in the first person. This tells us that what he says about love is what he aspires to do; these aspirations underlie everything he is writing to the community.

While most of what Paul is saying might seem self-evident, one sentence that deserves careful, critical interpretation says that love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” That could sound like an invitation to naiveté or a demand that we blindly trust a compulsive liar.

We can better interpret this idea in the light of the final statement: “Faith, hope, love remain.” This invites us to understand the call to believe in others through the lens of hope. Rather than insist that we never question someone's veracity, Paul is saying we should never give up on anyone.

Paul lived that axiom throughout his ministry. As we see in the case of the Corinthians, he was sometimes sorely disappointed by the behavior of communities that betrayed the message of faith. But even when he felt they had forsaken their commitment, rather than abandon them, Paul allowed his faith to galvanize his ongoing ministry to them, believing that they could indeed learn to let love lead them so that they could be the body of Christ in their world.

## **LUKE 4:21-30**

Today's Gospel begins with the last words we heard Jesus speak in last week's Gospel: “Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” Last week, we considered that as the way Jesus reintroduced himself to his hometown. We saw that this statement meant that he was about to go into action as God's anointed one. This week, the Lectionary uses that same statement to introduce the story of how Jesus' announcement caused division among his own.

Luke does not do much to help us understand the dynamics at work in this selection. He tells us that Jesus identified himself as the servant of God whom Isaiah had described as one who would bring good news to every sort of outcast. Luke then explains that Jesus' audience had three responses. First, they were "amazed." In scriptural language, amazement or wonderment functions like a code for being impressed while avoiding any sign of commitment. A movie director might stage it by having people raise their eyebrows without saying or doing anything else.

The second response was approval. Luke tells us that the crowd spoke highly of Jesus. The screenwriter crafting this scene would have the people's dialogue focus on the words and delivery, avoiding any serious mention of Jesus himself.

After their spontaneous, somewhat positive/somewhat ambivalent reaction, the audience began to comprehend the fact that Jesus had presented himself as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Finally, it dawned on them that Jesus was not performing a recital but making a real announcement. He was taking himself so seriously that they took a second look. They quickly reckoned that it just couldn't be true. Joseph's son couldn't possibly be all he cracked himself up to be. If he wanted to be taken seriously, he had better give them more of a performance.

Jesus knew them as well as they thought they knew him. So he faced their skepticism head-on and let them know what his announcement meant for them. He told them that if they thought his vocation was to bring them fame and fortune, they hadn't understood a word he had said. Just as Israel's vocation was to be a light to the nations, his vocation was to be good news for the poor. The closer they came to God, the more they would be called beyond themselves for the sake of others.

Of course, saying this implied that they were not living as faithfully as they could. With that, they decided that they were through with him. In a conclusion that foreshadowed the rest of the Gospel, Luke shows that Jesus' invitation to conversion so angered some of his own people that they were ready to get rid of him. But their plan would not succeed — not then, not later, not ever.

The final line of this selection can be read as a simple conclusion: He left unharmed. It can also be read as the explanation of what happens to everyone who refuses to respond to Jesus with more than wonder or rejection. Luke says: "Jesus passed through the midst of them and went away." With that, Luke tells us that Christ is always ready to be present, but he will never force himself on anyone.

Like the people in the synagogue, today we too hear Jesus' announcement. Now, it is up to us to be amazed, impressed or angry, or to decide to follow him and see what it makes of us.

## **Planning: Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

By Lawrence Mick

Last week, we considered how the word of God might be more effectively proclaimed in our assemblies. That is an ongoing challenge, so you might want to think more about it this week. But today's readings might also lead to the other side of the coin: How do we get the assembly to listen more effectively?

This is not a new issue, of course. The Bible constantly confronts us with the experience of the prophets (and of Jesus) who were often ignored or mistreated because people didn't really want to hear the word of God that asked them to change their lives. We hear it again today with Jeremiah: "They will fight against you but not prevail over you, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." Those words might have run through the mind of Jesus as he was being run out of his hometown of Nazareth, too.

Their experiences remind us that a major obstacle to effective hearing of the word is our innate resistance to change. Planners might discuss how they think about the Catholic faith and how they imagine most parishioners understand it. Is it mostly about maintaining the status quo, upholding proper decorum and morality, keeping things as close as possible to "the way it is always been"? Or do you (and the parish) see our faith as primarily a call to change our minds and our lives, a revolutionary movement Jesus started to upend the usual social structures and assumptions most people have about God and the proper state of the world?

Consider the second reading today. Is it heard as just a nice poem to be used at weddings affirming the tender joy of married love? Or is it a call to reconsider all the values that our society holds up as more important than love: money, power, fame, status, influence, possessions, personal reputation, etc.? How would our world have to change if we really wanted to embody Paul's view of love and life?

Do these reflections lead you naturally to a variety of prayers today? Reflect upon these petitions: for the courage to listen to God's word, for the wisdom to value love over other things in life, for the prophets of our own time that they might be strong in their mission, for political leaders that they might be willing to change the unjust structures of our society, for ourselves that we might be willing to surrender some things we value for the sake of a love that goes far beyond our families?

## **Prayers: Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

By Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

Who really wants to be called upon to change, let alone promote it in others? The prophets surely didn't, and Jesus early on heard the reaction to his sermon among his own people. Today's readings remind us that our faith is grounded in God's word. That always involves the call to be and live differently. Just as God's love sustained others, we are equipped with spiritual gifts, especially love, to respond to that same call.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you were sent to minister to those considered outcasts: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, your ministry was rejected by your own people: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you equip us for the same challenges and resistance you faced: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** We pray now, as people called to live God's word in every circumstance of our lives.

**Minister** For Pope Francis and all in the church who face the hard reality required of those who witness to the Gospel and its call to change, we pray:



- For all contemporary prophets who challenge the status quo in politics, religion or culture, and for those afraid to hear or support them, we pray:
- For the United States, as the nation celebrates Black History Month, for anyone who has suffered from the scourge of racism, those who deny its lingering reality, and those seeking justice for all people, we pray:
- For all in our country who are treated as outsiders: for the poor and poorly educated, refugees and the imprisoned, those struggling with mental illness or physical disabilities; and for those working on their behalf, we pray:
- For the will and courage to practice the spiritual gifts we have been given and the gift of love above all else, we pray:
- For those among us facing unwanted changes in work or health, finances or relationships, citizen status or safety, we pray:

**President** God, who challenges our values and calls us to change, we turn to you in our reluctance to abandon the familiar and step out into new and uncharted territory. Grant us the same strength you gave to the prophets and to your Son, Jesus. May we hear your word and promote your love to the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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