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by Mary M. McGlone

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Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

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2 Maccabees 7:1-2, 9-14

Psalms 17

2 Thessalonians 2:16-3:5

Luke 20:27-38

The unabridged story of the Maccabee family (2 Maccabees 7) outshines anything done by the heroes of Marvel Comics and their malicious adversaries. It seems incredible that a mother would encourage her seven sons to die rather than taste pork, but the food was an essential symbol of their religious identity. Their refusal to eat pork defied their oppressor and expressed a fearless proclamation of their faith in the God of life.

The hardest parts of this story describe how a cruel king forced a mother to look on as her seven sons followed her counsel and accepted death rather than renounce their religion. Speaking to her sons as they faced torture, she repeated one of the most humble, courageous and faith-filled statements we find in the Scriptures: "I do not know how you came to be in my womb; it was not I who gave you breath and life. Therefore ... the Creator of the universe will give you back both breath and life since you now disregard yourselves for the sake of his law."

That kind of faith in the God of life demonstrated that she was far stronger than the death-dealing king. One of her sons echoed her audacity and conviction by taunting his tormenter, saying, "Mortal though you are, you have power over human beings, so you do what you please. But do not think that our nation is forsaken by God."

Beyond being a saga about heroes, this family's story gives us a glimpse of how the people of Israel developed their ideas about eternal life based on their understanding of God's goodness and justice. Because they could not conceive that a God of justice would allow the innocent to simply suffer and disappear, they knew there must be eternal restitution for God's faithful who suffer unjustly in this life.

The youngest of the Maccabee brothers, the last to be executed, expressed it wonderfully as he mocked the king's naive arrogance: "You, wretch, most vile of mortals, do not, in your insolence, buoy yourself up with unfounded hopes as you raise your hand against the children of heaven. You have not yet escaped the judgment of the almighty and all-seeing God."

All seven brothers and their mother accepted death, proclaiming with their lives that the last word over evil belongs to God alone.

Today's Gospel comes off like a pallid parody in the light of the saga of the Maccabees. The Sadducees who wove the outrageous story of a woman taken as a wife by seven ill-fated brothers intended to ridicule the entire idea of life after death. But Jesus, beating them at their own game, took their tale at face value. Rather than get caught in their spiel, he simply pointed out that they had it all wrong.

The Sadducees believed that a man lived on only through his descendants. The legal norm behind their anecdote commanded a man to marry his childless brother's widow so that their progeny would insure the deceased against the oblivion of death.

Jesus didn't take issue with the law, but with the presupposition. Even though God had promised Abraham more descendants than the sands of the shore, Jesus asserted that life in the reign of God has nothing to do with children or anything else that human beings think they can produce. Although we are tempted to evaluate the limited human lifespan on the accomplishments a person leaves behind, Jesus proposed that the meaning of life comes from God's own self-gift and that we find fulfillment in relationships of love "like the angels," rather than on anything that society recognizes as achievement.

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These readings offer a moral reflection on relationships and on the meaning of life itself. Jesus' response to the Sadducees turns their ridiculous example inside out to proclaim that the life of women and children — of all people — has intrinsic value. Their inherent dignity and destiny demand that they never be treated as the means to someone else's goals. The Maccabee family sacrificed their lives to proclaim that faithfulness to God and integrity are more important than life itself.

These stories invite us to reflect on our life in community and the fact that life is not about self-aggrandizement or even self-preservation, but about cultivating reverence for the uniqueness of each member for the good of the whole.

Sometimes, it seems that facing a fiery furnace once and for all is easier than overcoming the incessant enticements of society's promotion of shallow meaning, oppressive power, and self-serving relationships. Today, we are invited to reflect on the great and small things that might threaten our integrity as people of faith.

Once we recognize the challenges we are facing, we can ask for the prayers of the Maccabees as we try to imitate their courage and conviction.

[Mary M. McGlone is a Sister of St. Joseph currently writing the history of the Sisters of St. Joseph in the U.S.]

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