

by Mary McGlone

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One day one of our sisters told me she wondered whether people listened to one another in the participatory prayer of the faithful. She wished she could test if they were really praying together instead of going through the motions, and admitted her ongoing temptation to use a sweetly pious voice and softly intone the request: “Loving God, let this holy roof with all its heavy beams fall in on us at this moment.” Then, slightly louder, “For this let us pray to the Lord.” I don’t think she ever did it, but I often think of her when the cue “through Christ our Lord” elicits my automatic “Amen,” although I may not have a clue about what preceded that four-word formula. The opening prayer of today’s liturgy asks, “God ... grant us to love what you command and to desire what you promise.” We’d better think twice before we come in with our “Amen” to that one. That’s part of the message of today’s readings.

The prophets understood that praying was serious business and often a real danger to their personal and communal agendas. Isaiah’s people had prayed for salvation, and when their prayer was answered, it became Isaiah’s job to make them aware of the implications of God’s gifts. Their freedom started out wonderfully. The exiles returned home and “the nations,” the pagans in the process of enlightenment, came to worship with them. But then this glorious multiethnic gathering usurped Israel’s exclusive advantage.

Israel’s prayer had been answered in a bigger way than they had hoped. God was calling forth priests and Levites from new populations — blatantly ignoring the rules restricting who could function in those roles. Isaiah doesn’t tell us how it turned out,

but we can guess. For those Israelites, as for religious leaders today, cultivating a desire for the fulfillment of God's promises is a challenge when it impinges on their privilege and primacy.

There's a slightly different twist on that idea in today's rather confusing Gospel. Here, not long after teaching people to knock until the door is opened (Luke 11), Jesus seems to renege on that promise, saying that at some point the master will lock the door and that's it. This incident began when somebody asked how many people were in the process of being saved. Jesus was not in the habit of giving straight answers to such simplistic questions. Instead, complicating the question and confounding the questioners, he turned the tables and said that the process is not so cut and dried.

Making the process of salvation sound almost like an athletic competition, Jesus tells them that they have to strive (the very expressive Greek word is *agonizomai*) to enter through a narrow gate. He makes a point of saying that many won't be strong enough to accomplish it. At this juncture the disciples might have thought they were entering the twilight zone. Not only did Jesus seem to be talking about the brute strength needed to push your way into salvation, but then he warned that latecomers would be locked out. What's going on here?

This week's readings preach directly to the choir. It's as if those of us walking out of church on Sunday meet Jesus and say, "Hey, are you going to do anything about those laggards who didn't show up today? And what about those folks who don't even deserve to walk into this place?" The not-so-cryptic answer Jesus gives us in today's Gospel is "Be careful. Your mind has made that door awfully narrow. You're going to have one tough time getting through!" Then, to underline his point, Jesus will warn us, "As soon as you think you've got the admittance ticket and know who shouldn't get in, you've locked the door against yourself."

The people who are locked out have a problem they refuse to recognize. They think they want in, but the party they plan to attend is not what's happening inside. The door is locked because the kind of banquet they want doesn't exist. The people who can't get in are the ones who pride themselves on belonging to an exclusive club with membership requirements they themselves would have written. They say they know Christ and have all the merit badges to prove it: We heard you teach, we ate with you, etc. But they didn't really listen to what they heard or partake of the communion of self-giving.

As the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us, growing into what God hopes for us is a process that can be painful. The kingdom of God is like a banquet that we will enjoy only to the extent that we love what God desires and desire what God offers. Many are called, but some prefer a more exclusive guest list.

### **ISAIAH 66:18-21**

This selection comes at the end of Third Isaiah and interprets the early part of the Book of Isaiah in light of the experience of those who have returned from exile and are rebuilding Zion. As the prophet finishes his message, he re-emphasizes one of the core messages of the entire book: Being a chosen people is a grace and a vocation that calls them to carry forth God's plan for all the world.

What's the rub that makes this message prophetic instead of simply dogmatic? The Chosen People are not just to be missionaries, emissaries of the truth they know. God is going to add to their number, introducing new languages and cultures, even new ideas into their midst. The last line of the reading is the most disturbing. Sneaked in almost like an afterthought is the message that some of those foreigners will become priests and Levites.

In the midst of wonderful promise, Isaiah hits the people with the message they might have blissfully ignored in ages past: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord" (Isa 55:8). God's plan is not tied to their agenda, and one of the prickliest points of God's agenda is an enlargement of their cherished traditions. No longer will their restrictive regulations determine leadership: God will call whom God will call.

This reading invites us to recognize when and how we might stand with the Israelite "restorationists" who were so eager for God to help them build the future they envisioned. God's plan was indeed to save them. That included saving them from their own narrowness, exclusivity and religious chauvinism. The People of God is a congregation with an ever-open membership list, and everyone on it is charged to do just what today's psalm says: Go out to all the world and tell the good news.

### **HEBREWS 12:5-7, 11-13**

At its core, the Letter to the Hebrews is the New Testament's version of the Christian community's earliest self-help homily. Not exactly a letter, it uses an ongoing comparison of the old and new to restore the community's fervor. The author wants

to keep the community on track in their Christian pilgrimage at a time when they seem to have grown road-weary. They stand in real danger of settling for complacency and succumbing to the petty complaints that accompany it. In the line before our reading opens, the final line of last Sunday's selection, the author not-so-subtly comments, "In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood." In other words, "Be careful about playing the martyr, there have been some real ones among us."

With that caveat, the author goes on to deal in earnest with the people's situation. Yes, they are suffering — they are facing unspecified "trials" that they are going to have to endure. The author does not accept the idea that these trials come from God, but that does not mean that God has nothing to do with them.

The author/counselor's advice is: "Endure your trials as discipline." This is a more-than-subtle hint that Jesus is their only worthy model. Earlier in Hebrews, we read: "Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered, and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Heb 5:8). With that allusion, the counselor is offering the community a road beyond depression and lethargy. It's not just a call to buck up, but an appeal to discernment; our author wants the community to discover God's plan in what they are going through. In order to do that, they have to remember that they are "disciples," people undergoing the "discipline" of learning and growing. If they allow it, everything they go through can be a part of their process of conversion, their journey toward living in the peace of genuine righteousness: union of heart and mind with God.

The message of Hebrews addresses the majority of Christians throughout history. We are the ones who are in far more danger from lethargy than from serious persecution, who have more reason to worry about mosquitoes than lions. Today's selection might be thought of as a wake-up call. When we're feeling weak or drooping or disjointed, it's time to let the Spirit rouse us and lead us to discern how God would have us walk the path ahead.

## **LUKE 13:22-30**

At first glance, today's Gospel presents a jarring and unfamiliar sort of good news. Does it sound like Jesus to say that after the master has arisen, he'll lock the door and disavow knowledge of people who come knocking? How does this story follow

the part in Chapter 11 where Jesus told his listeners that all they needed to do was ask, seek and knock? What Jesus promised in response to those petitions was not answers, visions or a mansion but the Holy Spirit; even so, this teaching sounds harsh, as if being tardy merits damnation.

Beginning where our reading picks up, Luke reminds us that Jesus was traveling the road to Jerusalem. He was in that process of facing his final test when someone asked, “Are only a few being saved?” (In Greek, the question speaks of the present, not the future.) The question came right out of a worldview of privilege, assuming that some are chosen and the rest might as well not bother. We can pretty well suppose that the inquirer assumed he was among the saved, because in what follows, Jesus warns against such presumption.

True to form, when asked “how many,” Jesus avoided the numbers game. He focused on the process, not the final score. But then, sounding less like a Good Shepherd than the driver of an outrageously overcrowded bus, Jesus tells folks to strive to push through an entrance so narrow that many won’t be strong enough to make it. That perplexing image leads to some serious questions: What makes that entry so narrow? What kind of strength is necessary to get through? When and why does the door get locked?

It seems that the key to resolving these questions comes with the final line: “Some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last.” Perhaps the challenge of the constrained entry has less to do with the size of the crowd or the individuals than with the size of their egos. The people who can get through seem to be comfortable being out of order; they’re the people who don’t understand or don’t care about their place in line. People like that don’t end up jamming the doorway because they are sure that there’s plenty of room and plenty of time. They may even instigate a sing-along or some games while they’re waiting to get in. These people have unique strengths that include faith in the bounty of the host, the confident hope that breeds patience, and the open-hearted love that engenders an ability to enjoy the company of strangers. They transform waiting in line into the entrée to the banquet itself.

What then about the locked door? It’s easy to overlook the fact that after the master of the house has locked the door, Jesus says, “*you* will stand outside knocking ...” In that moment, whoever asked the question is on the hot seat. The teacher suddenly focuses directly on the one who started the conversation, and it’s not a comfortable

gaze. The Master says, "I do not know where you are from." Their claim to have eaten and drunk with him and to have heard him teaching in the streets provides no entrance ticket. The master repeats, "I do not know where you are from."

This cannot be a simple question of geography or nationality. Somehow the master knows enough about these people to know they never waited in line for this banquet. They do not come from among those who followed him or from those who hoped in him. They have not marched with the throngs that came from east and west, north and south, seeking the kingdom of God. To put it bluntly, these "evildoers" have the wrong address. Their hopes have nothing in common with the party going on inside. The door must be locked against any and all who would crash the party only to spoil it. They didn't appreciate Abraham, they killed the prophets and they are now trying to trap Jesus. But if they really listen to the word, there is a glimmer of hope. If they are willing to be last, if they are willing to wait and to knock again and again, the door will open, and by then they will be humbled enough to fit inside.

## **Planning: 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**By:** Lawrence Mick

The readings today present us with a challenge to our natural tendency toward provincialism. We human beings seem instinctively inclined to focus on and care about what is right around us. The word of God, on the other hand, challenges us to embrace a much broader view and a much wider circle of care.

Our concern for what is close by is understandable, especially when it is viewed in survival terms. In ages long past, dangers lurked nearby; distant things were not a threat. So, too, good things were close at hand; what was far away was beyond our reach. Today, however, mass communication and transportation bring riches that would have been unthinkable to our ancestors, and long-range weapons can threaten us from across the globe. A global mindset has become essential to the survival of the human race, with global climate change and its devastating effects being a prime example of such worldwide reach. We desperately need to learn to work together across the planet if the human race is to survive and thrive.

It should be no secret that Catholics are called to exercise global awareness. Our very name means “universal,” and we know that our church has members in every part of the world. We know that we are bound to those other churches through our bishops and the bishop of Rome. Yet it is still apparent that many Catholics have not fully embraced the meaning of our name. There is a strong temptation to focus on our own neighborhood and our own comfort and to ignore the needs and problems of people far away.

How might you bring about a deeper global awareness in the parish? Perhaps begin by discerning how many parts of the world are represented in your own community, either by recent immigrants or by those who came generations ago. Can you find ways to share the stories of each group, stories of their native lands and stories of the journeys that brought them to your community? Are there elements of those various cultures that can be integrated into your worship? Are the various groups adequately represented in the different liturgical ministries, so that the liturgy itself reflects our global identity?

Even if you are in a parish with little ethnic diversity, you still need to reflect the global nature of the church in your worship. One simple way is to broaden the musical repertoire of the parish to include musical styles and tunes from around the globe. Simply singing with melodies and rhythms from other cultures reminds us that we have brothers and sisters in other lands. Among songs composed in our own land, look for those that express a wider view, like “In Christ There Is No East or West” or “For the Healing of the Nations” or “Lord of All Nations, Grant Me Grace.”

## **Prayers: 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**By:** Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

Who would not be interested in accepting God’s endless mercy? Today’s readings remind us that not everyone responds in the same way to what is offered. Living the Gospel is a joy and a privilege, with ultimate rich rewards. But we know there is no guarantee of a smooth journey. The discipline required may not be for everyone — even those we love. All we can do is to embrace the invitation issued to us and pray that countless others will join us in discipleship when they are ready.

## Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you invited many to be your disciples: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you warned that not all would accept your invitation: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you reminded us that people from afar would sit at your table: Lord, have mercy.

## Prayer of the Faithful

**Presider** Brothers and sisters, let us pray for all people who are invited to accept God's endless, loving mercy.

**Minister** For the church: that it may present the face of God's loving invitation to the whole world ... we pray,

- For those who do not yet know the good news of God's mercy ... we pray,
- For those we especially love who are not responsive to the invitation to discipleship ... we pray,
- For those who distort Jesus' message, causing scandal or rejection ... we pray,
- For students and teachers who are beginning a new academic year ... we pray,
- For families struggling to make ends meet, and for those committed to serving them ... we pray,
- For peace throughout the world, across our country and within our communities and families ... we pray,
- For the weary, the sick and the dying among us; and for those who have died ... *(names)* ... we pray,

**Presider** Merciful God, you extend your love to all people who are open to receive it. Help us to be compassionate toward those who choose not to accept your invitation, and to be steadfast in our own commitment. Strengthen us when we falter. We ask these things in the name of Jesus, whom you sent to us. Amen.

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