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We have celebrated the paschal mystery. Holy Week is over. We have journeyed through salvation history with the Easter Vigil and stand now in the light of the risen One. The purple vestments are put away until Advent. The basins and pitchers and the tools for the Easter fire are put away until needed next year. After the marathon that is Holy Week, it is no surprise that we would like time to collect ourselves, catch our breath and put our feet up for just a little while.

But that is not what the church has in mind for us. Having experienced the power of the paschal mystery, we are called to enter more deeply into the Christ-life that we are given to share. It is the Easter season, the time of mystagogia, a time to expand our understanding of our faith. For those who have come into the church at Easter, this is the final part of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. For those of us who have long been part of the church, this is our time to prepare for rekindling the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

### **The days before Pentecost**

We are used to looking at these 50 days as days after Easter. What if we began to look at them as the days before Pentecost? These are the days when the church moves from the experience of Jesus among us in the flesh as a human being to the time when God's presence among is experienced through the Holy Spirit. This Spirit dwells with us, among us and within us. These 50 days give us time to transition our focus from the Christ who leads us and teaches us to the Spirit who leads us and teaches us.

We still discern with the community of faith, the church, to test the spirit and be sure that we follow God's Spirit and not the spirit of another sort. But each of us has a share of that Spirit and the gifts given to us by God for the good of the body, the church. Let's look at the weeks of Easter in the light of this renewal of the Spirit in our lives.

### **The first stirrings of hope**

On Easter Sunday, we sense the first stirrings of hope as Jesus' followers glimpse what he meant about rising from the dead. This is the purpose of the entire Easter octave. The Second Sunday of Easter is known as Divine Mercy Sunday. We are each called to forgive because we have been forgiven. During the daily readings, we consider anew the mystery of baptism, recognizing how our membership in the body of Christ and our priesthood as believers began with this sacrament.

On the Third Sunday of Easter, we hear about the disciples fishing and Jesus on the shore making breakfast. We look again at the God who feeds us. In this season, we go from partaking of fish by the breakfast fire to manna in the wilderness, from five loaves and two fish to the bread of life. This is the meal of bread and wine, true flesh and true blood, the bread of everlasting life.

That brings us to the Fourth Sunday of Easter, often called Good Shepherd Sunday. "Jesus said, 'My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me' " (John 10:27).

John the Baptist saw Jesus and he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God" (John 1:29). Jesus tells us the "Lamb of God" is also the "Good Shepherd." As a lamb, Jesus knows how to follow the will of another. He knows hunger and thirst; he knows a need for safety. He knows that the world around him is filled with predators. As a shepherd, he knows how to find green pasture and still waters and how to protect his flock. He knows how to tell when the sheep are tired or ill or frightened and how to care for them in their vulnerability.

What does it mean to us to have a shepherd God? The sheep recognize the voice of the shepherd. They know their shepherd by sight and sound. They remember shepherds who abuse them and those who care for them. They willingly follow one they trust. We begin to learn how to be shepherds who care for others in the flock of God's people.

### **Love one another**

The Gospel for the Fifth Sunday of Easter is about love.

I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35)

We are truly, madly, deeply loved by God! Yet it is hard to believe that God loves us as we are. God doesn't wait for us to get our act together, to have all our faults eliminated and our virtues polished. God loves us, warts and all. Sometimes, we think that to be good Christians we should be doing something constructive. Well, we are. We are learning how to love.

In the Gospel of Matthew, we hear the commandment "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 19:19). But what is love worth unless we have truly learned to love ourselves, not in some self-centered or indulgent manner, but in a God-centered manner? "As I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34). We experience Jesus' love for us and so learn to love ourselves. Then, we can learn to love others as Jesus has loved us. Still, later, Jesus ups the ante one more time by saying, "As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love" (John 15:9). We are learning to be loved with the same love the Father bestowed on Jesus who pours it out on us. It is this love that we in turn are called to pour out on one another.

In the Gospel on the Sixth Sunday of Easter, we read about love dwelling in us and our dwelling in love.

Jesus answered and said to him, "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him." (John 14:23)

The hardest prayer to learn is to allow ourselves to be loved. We want to dress our souls up all neat and tidy before we pray. We bring our best selves into the divine presence. But God has the welcome mat out for our worst selves. That is the part of ourselves that is most welcome in the holy presence, as it is the part of us that most needs the transforming power of God's love.

### **Preach to all nations**

The Gospel for the Ascension of the Lord is from Luke. In keeping with Luke's concern for the universal nature of Christ's message, we hear the mission to preach to all the nations.

Jesus said to his disciples, "Thus it is written that the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem." (Luke

24:46-47)

All of us are called to preach to all the nations. St. Francis is supposed to have said, "Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary use words." We preach more by our actions and our attitudes than we do with words. Perhaps we preach more honestly non-verbally.

Note the content of the message that Jesus asks us to preach: repentance and the promise of forgiveness. In Luke, it is often the sinner who becomes the disciple. Those thought to be outsiders become intimate followers. It is Luke who tells the story of the sinful woman who came and washed Jesus' feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. In Luke, Jesus says, "I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little" (Luke 7:47).

In the Gospel for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, Jesus again prepares his disciples for what is ahead. He offers his prayer for them and for all of us who follow him. Lifting up his eyes to heaven, Jesus says, "I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me" (John 17: 20-21).

### **The witness we give**

We are reminded that the primary sign of Jesus' continued presence in the world is our love for one another and for all the children of God. Our care for each other, our care for the poor, the neglected or abandoned, and the least and the lost. This is the witness that we are meant to be to the world.

The Gospel for vigil Mass of Pentecost is also from John:

Jesus stood up and exclaimed, "Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. As Scripture says: Rivers of living water will flow from within him who believes in me." He said this in reference to the Spirit that those who came to believe in him were to receive. There was, of course, no Spirit yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified. (John 7:37-39)

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## **I will pour out water; I will pour out my Spirit**

Water is a powerful image for a desert people, which is what the Israelite people were. God is a fountain of living water for them (Jeremiah 2:13). Yet they abandoned him to dig leaky cisterns for themselves that held no water. The restoration of the people was presented as the return of the gift of water in the desert. In Isaiah, we see this water identified with the spirit of the Lord: "I will pour out water upon the thirsty ground, streams upon the dry land; I will pour out my spirit upon your offspring, my blessing upon your descendants. They shall spring forth amid grass like poplars beside flowing waters" (Isaiah 44:3-4).

We are born from the waters of the womb. We are reborn in the waters of baptism. We are refreshed and renewed with the Spirit welling up in us like a fountain of living water welling up to eternal life. It is important for us to take time to allow that water to pool in our hearts and rise up within us. We need to stay spiritually hydrated and not let our hearts wither from dryness. Then, we can be sources of refreshment to our companions on the journey.

## **The power of Pentecost**

The feast of Pentecost has two options for the Gospel reading, both from the Gospel of John. In the first, we are taken back to the very beginning of the Easter season, the evening after the Resurrection.

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." (John 20:21-22)

Jesus breathes on his disciples, yet they are not clothed with the power of the Holy Spirit until Pentecost. We are born of the Spirit when we are born into Christ. Yet there is a moment when we celebrate the power of that Spirit at work within us to do and be as God calls us. This lets us reflect on a mystery that is too great to take in all at once.

The other Gospel option has Jesus appearing in the upper room after his resurrection and giving this promise: "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you" (John 14:26).

Here, we see the Spirit as the Advocate or Paraclete. The word *paraclete* literally means "one who answers the cry," usually one who hears the cry of the poor, one who knows their need. We often translate it as lawyer, one who seeks justice for another, one who can find the words to defend and protect. The Spirit comes as our defender, our helper, our adviser and our teacher reminding us of what we have already learned. The Spirit also comes as gift giver and activator of the gifts we have received. We are told in the Letter to the Ephesians that these gifts are given "to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12).

### **The God who is three**

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity follows Pentecost. The Gospel reading is again from John.

Jesus said to his disciples: "... the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth. He will not speak on his own, but he will speak what he hears, and will declare to you the things that are coming. He will glorify me, because he will take from what is mine and declare it to you. Everything that the Father has is mine; for this reason I told you that he will take from what is mine and declare it to you." (John 16:12-15)

We celebrate one God who is three. We celebrate a community that is also a unity. This is not something we understand. Rather, we gaze upon it with the eyes filled with awe and wonder. God is always bigger than our minds can hold. That is a good thing, otherwise our fears would seem overwhelming. With a God so big, our troubles can only be smaller by comparison. We celebrate the greatness of our God.

### **Jesus makes it enough**

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ comes next. Luke tells the story of the feeding of the multitude. It had been a long day of preaching. The people were hungry. There was no place nearby to find food for the crowd. Jesus told the disciples to feed them anyway. They had among them only five loaves and a couple of fish. Jesus made it enough. The Gospel reading from Luke for this feast tells us:

Then taking the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing over them, broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. They all ate and were satisfied. And when the leftover fragments were picked

up, they filled twelve wicker baskets. (Luke 9:16-17)

## **The great verbs of the Eucharist**

Take, bless, break, give — these are the four great verbs of the Eucharist. They are the actions God performs with the bread. They are also the actions God takes in the lives of Christians.

Jesus took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to his disciples to distribute. The mystery we are contemplating here is that Christ continues to serve Christ. After we receive the body of Christ in Communion, we are sent to be the body of Christ in the world. We are not sent empty-handed, we are sent with the Holy Spirit and all the gifts the Spirit provides.

**Editor's note:** *This reflection was originally published in the May 2019 issue of [Celebration](#). Sign up to receive [daily Easter reflections](#).*

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