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March 31, 2019

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A story that has gone viral on the internet and which has been quoted by poets and writers alike is the story of the Bemba people who come mainly from Zambia, to the north of South Africa. The story, quoted by Alice Walker in her book *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For* and expanded in the Tennessee local newspaper *The Chatanooga*, can be summarized as follows: A group of people known as the people of Bemba believe that every human who comes into the world is good. Every person's deepest desire is for safety, love, peace and happiness. When someone from this group of people acts unjustly or irresponsibly, then that person is required to stand in the center of the village, alone and unrestrained. The other members of the Bemba people are called together and they gather in a large circle around the one who has been accused of some wrongdoing.

Each person gathered around the accused then begins to speak, recalling all the good things that the accused person has done throughout the course of a lifetime. Many good deeds are mentioned in great detail. All of the accused's positive attributes, strengths, kindnesses and efforts on behalf of the common good are recited carefully by different members of the group.

When everyone has spoken on behalf of the accused one, all the members of the Bemba people break the circle and a joyous celebration takes place. The one who

had committed an injustice or who had behaved badly is now welcomed back into the group and given a fresh start. Past deeds are now forgotten as celebration and reconciliation intersect. The Bemba people are stronger and more unified because of this ritual and their focus on the positive aspects of the person instead of the negative. This pastoral response, instead of a punitive one, supports the community in the face of difficult situations.

This story about the Bemba people sets the tone for this Sunday's readings which capture the essence of celebration and reconciliation. In the reading from Joshua, we hear that God has freed the Israelites from the reproach of Egypt. Their newfound freedom and their deepening relational experience of their God brings them to the point of celebrating Passover while they are encamped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho.

Various verses from Psalm 34 celebrate God's goodness. The psalmist begins offering words of blessing and praise to God and then invites the community to join in. The psalmist makes clear that Israel's God is worthy to be praised because this God not only hears the cry of the poor but also does something about it. The words of the psalmist are glad tidings to the lowly.

The reading from 2 Corinthians celebrates the good news about reconciliation. According to Paul, God is reconciled to the world through Christ. Christians are now called to enter into the ministry of reconciliation especially since they, together with Paul, have been entrusted with the message of reconciliation. Paul calls the community at Corinth, and by extension, all Christians, all people, to be reconciled to God. Paul envisions a God who is full of compassion, who keeps no tally of transgressions, and who does not hold offenses against those who have done them.

The themes of celebration and reconciliation come together in the parable of the prodigal son heard in this Sunday's Gospel from Luke. Jesus addresses this parable to a group of complaining Pharisees and scribes who take issue with Jesus' interaction with sinners. In this story, we hear about the precocious younger son of an estate owner making bad decisions about the inheritance given to him by his father. He sets off to a distant country but because of poor choices, he becomes destitute. Meanwhile, his older brother remains at home and fares well because of the good choices he made with respect to his inheritance.

As the story progresses, we see the struggles of the younger son, his decision to return home, and his father's warm welcome much to the chagrin of his older brother. Significant is the point that when the younger son does return home, the father's warm embrace allows the wayward son to be honest, open and make amends with his father.

Thus, in all of Sunday's readings, we hear about the graciousness of God, especially embodied in the estate owner. The intersection of celebration and reconciliation leads to deeper and fuller union with the sacred, divine presence many of us call God. This in turn leads to life becoming a new creation.

### **JOSHUA 5:9a, 10-12**

This story opens with a focus on Joshua whom God addresses directly. This biblical character is the son of Nun, the young apprentice and successor to Moses. In this book that bears his name, he functions as military commander in the "conquest" of Canaan and as administrator of the allotment of that land to the tribes. Although the book of Joshua speaks about a conquest, the actuality of it lacks any certainty whatsoever.

Exactly what the "reproach of Egypt" that God is said to have removed from the Israelites is curious. "Reproach" implies the loss of social status and the experience of being disgraced. Here, it most likely refers to the people's enslavement in Egypt. Divine deliverance of the Hebrew people will not be complete until the former slaves are settled on their own land as God's free, covenant people.

Following a statement of address to Joshua comes a little vignette that focuses on the celebration of the Passover. Passover is Israel's great, central ritual celebrating God's deliverance of the people from slavery to Egypt. In Passover, Israel commemorates God having "passed over," that is, sparing their firstborn males of Egypt. According to Israel's traditions, this 10th plague finally drove Pharaoh to let the people go (Exodus 12). Through the Passover ritual, each new generation of Israel becomes part of God's saving act. The place where the Israelites celebrate Passover is at "Gilgal on the plains of Jericho." Gilgal is east of Jericho. The generation of Israelites born in the wilderness were circumcised there (Joshua 5:2-9). Jericho features predominantly only in the book of Joshua. It is a small town north of the Dead Sea.

The celebration of Passover in Gilgal ties the so-called “conquest” to the deliverance from Egypt while also signaling transition to a new era. The journey out of Egypt begins and ends with Passover. The original Passover marks the end of slavery in Egypt. Here, Joshua’s Passover occurs as Israel enters its land.

The Festival of Unleavened Bread follows the Passover. Within Israel’s remembered history, the Festival of Unleavened Bread is integrally linked to Passover and commemorates the Exodus, when those fleeing Egypt had not time to bake leavened bread. For Israel then, celebration that took the form of a meal was part of their journey.

### **PSALM 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7**

With the Israelites now having the reproach of Egypt removed from them, a song of thanksgiving becomes an appropriate response. Known as an alphabetic acrostic, whereby each verse of the psalm begins with a Hebrew letter, this psalm is a song of thanksgiving that celebrates the deliverance of one who has been suffering. The psalm’s tone is hopeful and its message is instructional insofar as it serves as an assurance to the community that those who call out to God in distress will indeed be heard, and something will be done to alleviate the difficulty being experienced.

The psalm begins with bold language which is typical of thanksgiving psalms. The opening verse expresses the purpose of offering praise and thanksgiving to God who comes to deliver. On the part of the psalmist, the praise and thanksgiving will be unceasing. The working power of the saving and revealing presence of God is not something to remain hidden. The psalmist’s life will become a witness to God’s power and then the lowly will hear and be glad.

In the first part of the second verse, the psalmist shifts focus away from the personal to the communal, but in the second part of the verse, the psalmist gives the reason why this God is to be praised: God has answered the one seeking; God has delivered the one seeking from all fears.

God’s steadfast love is the central idea that the psalmist expresses in the third verse. God is the one who allows the community to be radiant and filled with joy because God responds to those in need. For the psalmist, then, life with God is dialectical with human weakness encountering divine power. This power, however, is not something that is hierarchical; it is a healing and compassionate power that restores life.

## **2 CORINTHIANS 5:17-21**

Paul's address to the community at Corinth begins on a positive note: Whoever is in Christ is a new creation. This idea of the Christian life as a "new creation" is quite common in Paul's writing. This phrase, coupled with the thought that the old things have passed away and new things are coming, has a twofold purpose. First, by using these ideas, Paul seems keen on moving the Corinthians away from a scale of judgment based on outward appearance (2 Corinthians 5:12). Second, Paul seems to have known that the renewing love of Christ is the only power that can truly restore broken relationships in the church.

The second part of Paul's letter focuses on the theme of reconciliation. Paul presents his readers with several lessons. First, reconciliation is God-given. The reconciliation of which the Gospel speaks is not a human attempt to placate a distant and disaffected God. Reconciliation starts with God, reaching out to the world in the person of Jesus, taking on the flesh of humankind, and entering into all of humankind's conflicts and pains to the point of even taking on death. Paul reminds his listeners that "all this is from God" (5:18). Hence, the possibility of living a new life and entering a new creation starts with God's initiative and involvement.

Second, reconciliation includes forgiveness. Paul asserts that when God reaches out to reconcile, no record is kept of sins or wrongdoings. People can start again; the slate is clean.

Third, reconciliation is not a private affair. It is to be shared. Paul talks about a "ministry" and a "message." He calls himself an "ambassador," who speaks on God's behalf, as he urges and encourages people to respond to what God has done. Paul's ministry continues to be part of the church's task today: to tell of God's reconciling love and to invite people to trust it for themselves.

Fourth, reconciliation costs. This verse is perhaps one of the most intense texts in the Christian Scriptures. The sinless Christ "made ... to be sin" (5:21). The reference here is to Jesus' crucifixion and the way that Jesus was drawn into the horrific web of human shame and spite.

Finally, reconciliation is something to be received. The Gospel invites people into new relationship with God. Thus, for Paul, God is the source of human reconciliation. This divine power enables the ministry of reconciliation in the world, extended to all areas where divisions remain.

## **LUKE 15:1-3, 11-32**

The dimensions of reconciliation are multifaceted. Nowhere in any other Gospel story do we see the intersection between reconciliation and celebration come to life as it does in the parable of the prodigal son. Luke's story opens with Jesus trying to quell the complaints of the Pharisees and scribes who are annoyed at the fact that he welcomes and eats with sinners. This parable, the longest one of all the parables, opens with a son asking for and receiving his inheritance of land.

Two important points about land come to the fore. First, according to ancient Israelite tradition, the elder/eldest son is supposed to have a double share of the inheritance (Deuteronomy 21:17). In the case of the elder son, then, he should have inherited two-thirds and his younger brother one-third of the estate. Ironically, the father divides the land equally among the two boys. Second, the division of property ordinarily awaited the death of the father, and there were provisions in traditional law for penalties when the share was withdrawn ahead of time. What we see here is the younger son cutting ties with his family and having no regrets about his actions.

This younger son squanders all of his inheritance, and he is forced to hire himself out. He takes a job tending pigs. In ancient days, caring for pigs evoked the idea of apostasy and the loss of everything that once identified the younger son as a member of his family and God's people. Hunger and calamity finally bring the younger son to his senses, and he returns home as a hired servant.

The father's all-embracing love for and response to his younger son is what moves that son to take responsibility for what he has done. The gift that the father gives to this wayward son is compassion. Compassion is one of the most consoling, renewing and transforming words in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Derived from the Hebrew root *rhm*, "compassion" is both a divine characteristic and a human sentiment; it is an attitude and a way of life. In the biblical texts we see that divine compassion embraces not only human beings but also all sentient beings. Hence, divine compassion, as we see it, embraces all of life. This divine, all-inclusive compassionate attitude toward life is not just a warm and fuzzy feeling; it is an attitude that is at the heart of life-sustaining, life-renewing and life-transforming actions. The father's compassion leads to his younger son's change of attitude and change of heart.

In the midst of the younger son's story is the older son's story. The elder son's anger and self-righteousness make him resentful. Not even the return of his brother will make him want to share in the family celebration. Here, we see once again the pivot of the father's love. The father goes out to the elder son just as he went out to the younger son. He wants them both to be happy. The elder son, however, cannot see this kind gesture. He is caught in his own anger. Yet, his anger is understandable; he is totally frustrated with his father. Now, the father has to be a negotiator. With tenderness, he tries to help the elder son grasp the fullness of what his brother's return truly means. Whether or not the elder son comes to a new place of understanding is not known. What we do know is that the elder son has been invited to celebrate with the family.

Reconciliation has occurred; celebration is to happen. The elder son has been called to the table. We too are called. Reconciliation demands that we "let go" so that we can join in the celebration and the transformation of life into new life.

## **Planning: Fourth Sunday of Lent**

By Lawrence Mick

Today is the 4th Sunday of Lent, also known as Laetare Sunday. Remember that this marks the center of Lent and offers a glimpse of Easter joy. This is a day when you can use some flowers in the worship space and when musical accompaniment can be fuller than during the rest of Lent. Don't overdo, of course; it is still Lent. But people should notice the difference in tone this Sunday.

If you are celebrating scrutinies this Lent, be sure to take time to evaluate how the ritual is being carried out. Catechumenate leaders should be helping the elect to unpack the experience each week to foster a deeper conversion. Could liturgy planners join in those sessions to see how the ritual is actually being experienced by the elect? Perhaps talk with some other parishioners to see how the assembly is experiencing the scrutiny? Do they welcome this chance to share in the conversion journey of the elect, or is it just an inconvenience that makes the Mass last a couple of minutes longer? That may depend on how well the community has gotten to know the elect throughout their catechumenate.

Certainly, some folks will always object to anything extra in the Mass, but what is the general experience? Is the assembly fully engaged in the rite? If not, what can be done to increase their involvement? Have they been taught whatever acclamations are being sung? Can they see the faces of the elect during the ritual? Would it help to seat the elect at several places within the assembly rather than all up front? What will work in your space and with your community?

Also evaluate the petitions that are part of the scrutiny. Do they address the real concerns of the elect? Do they also include areas that the whole assembly needs to pray about? How can you make them more powerful? Would singing them with a sung response help?

All of this presumes ongoing cooperation between liturgy planners and the RCIA team. Too often the two groups barely interact, which can lead to conflicts and missteps when it comes time to celebrate any of the initiation rituals during the Sunday liturgies. The rite insists that the initiation of new members is the business of all the baptized, but it takes practical efforts to make that statement true in fact. How well do you interface with the RCIA team in your parish? How could communication and planning be improved?

If you didn't schedule your Lenten penance service last week, today's Gospel parable of the prodigal son offers another good theme for such a service. If Cycle A readings were used at all the Masses, don't worry too much about missing this parable. It will come back in several months on the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Sept. 11).

## **Prayers: Fourth Sunday of Lent**

By Sue Robb\_

### **Introduction**

Today's readings focus on reconciliation, forgiveness and moving forward. Forgiveness is one-sided; one can choose to forgive, but reconciliation requires two people in the act of coming together. God offers us both forgiveness and reconciliation and does not hold our sins against us once we have asked for forgiveness. Are we able to do the same with one another?



## **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you feed and nurture us: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you call us to be reconciled with you and with one another: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, forgive us and call us back when we fail to love and forgive as you do: Lord, have mercy.

## **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** In the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation, we lift up our prayers to God, the healer of all division.

**Minister For** our church and the divisions within; for unity among all religions, we pray:

- For peace and reconciliation among nations, among leaders and among individuals; for a fervent desire to work toward unity and understanding with other cultures and celebrate our diversity, we pray:
- For healing of broken relationships within families; unreconciled losses due to death or alienation; children of divorce and abuse; the sins inherited from our ancestors, we pray:
- For reconciliation with creation, for the abuses we inflict on our planet to meet our earthly desires; for the waste we mindlessly create and discard; for forgiveness for our gluttony, we pray:
- For the pride that keeps us from confessing our sins; for fear that binds us; for reconciliation between those we have hurt and those who have hurt us, we pray:
- In thanksgiving for those who work to protect and mend bodies, minds, spirits and relationships; for peacekeepers in foreign lands, we pray:
- For all who suffer mental and physical illnesses and disabilities; for forgiveness and peace for all who will soon draw their last breath; and for all who have died, we pray:

**Presider** God of many chances, hear and answer our prayers if they be in accord with your will. We ask this in the name of Jesus, who reconciled himself to the world. Amen.

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