

Readings for Sunday the 26th Sunday of the Year

FIRST READING: Ezekiel 18:25-28

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel:

Thus says the LORD: You say, "The LORD's way is not fair!" Hear now, house of Israel: Is it my way that is unfair, or rather, are not your ways unfair? When someone virtuous turns away from virtue to commit iniquity, and dies, it is because of the iniquity he committed that he must die. But if he turns from the wickedness he has committed, he does what is right and just, he shall preserve his life; since he has turned away from all the sins that he has committed, he shall surely live, he shall not die.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 25:4-5, 8-9, 10, 14.

Remember your mercies, O Lord.

Your ways, O LORD, make known to me; teach me your paths, guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my savior.

Remember your mercies, O Lord.

Remember that your compassion, O LORD, and your love are from of old. The sins of my youth and my frailties remember not; in your kindness remember me, because of your goodness, O LORD.

Remember your mercies, O Lord.

Good and upright is the LORD; thus he shows sinners the way. He guides the humble to justice, and teaches the humble his way.

Remember your mercies, O Lord.

SECOND READING: Philippians 2:1-11

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Philippians:

Brothers and sisters: If there is any encouragement in Christ, any solace in love, any participation in the Spirit, any compassion and mercy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing. Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but also for those of others. Have in you the same attitude that is also in Christ Jesus, Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The word of the Lord.

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

Jesus said to the chief priests and elders of the people: "What is your opinion? A man had two sons. He came to the first and said, 'Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.' He said in reply, 'I will not, ' but afterwards changed his mind and went. The man came to the other son and gave the same order. He said in reply, 'Yes, sir, but did not go. Which of the two did his father's will?" They answered, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Amen, I say to you, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you. When John came to you in the way of righteousness, you did not believe him; but tax collectors and prostitutes did. Yet even when you saw that, you did not later change your minds and believe him."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for Sunday the 26th Sunday of the Year

The four scripture readings on any given Sundays have an underlying theme. Usually there is a clear connection between the first reading and the gospel. The best way to begin is not with the first reading or gospel. One begins with the second reading and then makes connections with the other two from the points made in that one. This is a good rule of thumb. Sometimes it takes a bit of time and work. We start with Paul's letter to the Philippians.

What has Paul said? Christ has given us some powerful gifts, encouragement, solace, compassion and mercy. He used Jesus' mission to die on the cross and empty himself of life for us as the motivation to live anew. He laid out behaviors that help to build the Church and so work toward the kingdom of God. The gifts of Jesus can lead us to have compassion and mercy for one another. Jesus' example is meant to inspire us all to change. We can find Christ in each other. As God was exulted by Jesus actions, God is exulted through ours. Paul's advice is to place others before ourselves as Jesus placed us before himself. The end of this reading is an ancient hymn that Paul included for us. We call it a canticle.

Faith in Jesus has transformed us. Christ, through his cross has redeemed us. The Spirit renews us. Who we are in Christ influences what we think, feel and do. Once we receive and accept God's gift of faith, we cannot go back. For most of us, we have been raised with this for as long as we can remember. We were baptized as babies and raised from infancy to be good Christian people within the Catholic Church. However, we are only human and still sin.

Ezekiel raised up the notion of fairness. Are the Lord's ways unfair? At first reading, does God lie in wait for us to screw up and sin so we get tossed into hell for our sins? There is always a tension between God's justice and our notion of fairness. God's justice is always forgiveness. God is eternal. God is love. God's love is eternal and unconditional. We believe in hell, but we don't have to believe, given the nature of God, that there's anyone there. Here's where our notion of fairness can kick in. We want to see the guilty punished for that is our notion of justice. Context of this reading is important. Please feel free to look up and read the entire chapter 18 of Ezekiel.

There is an ancient tradition of how sin and sin's effects work. Sin is a collective thing. It is passed on from generation to generation. The sins of the parents are imposed upon the

children. Guilt for the sins is imposed upon the children too. As brutal as this sounds, we have similar notions. Family dysfunction can work this way. Behavior is learned and if bad behavior is modeled, what do children learn? As Catholics we know about original sin. Human nature can be weak. Anyone who's been on a diet knows how easy it is to cheat, and cheat we all will.

I watched a series by Bill Moyers back in the early 1990s called "Circle of Recovery." It followed several black men who had several related addictions, drugs, alcohol, violence and criminal behavior. They were all members of the same support group that led them to recovery. One of the men, while in prison, noted that his father and his son were serving time in the same prison at the same time, together. After his release he spoke to his sponsor about this. He spoke with deep concern about his infant grandson whose direct ancestors had the same history. He worried about the legacy and future this baby boy inherited, fearful that he would share the same fate. The sponsor asked a simple question. What kind of ancestor for him will you become? This grandfather had the ability and choice to change thereby becoming a model of new behavior to break the cycle of addiction and violence. This man was not a victim of his ancestry but the one who could move in a new direction. Ezekiel spoke to this directly.

Ezekiel put forth another way, personal responsibility for our own actions. Each of us is God's beloved child. Each of us is responsible to God for our own, not another's, actions. Put this way, God has children not grandchildren. Free will and personal choice guide our behavior not the behavior of our parents or children. God approaches each of us as individuals. Ezekiel is very contemporary in this way. If I have lived sixty six years a good and holy life and then at sixty seven I sin egregiously, will God damn me to hell? If Joe or Jane Schmoe lived an outrageously nasty, evil life for the same amount of years and then at sixty seven gets religion and becomes a living saint will he or she go to heaven? This is the heart of Ezekiel's story. This way of accepting responsibility does not deny the power of our inherited dysfunction. From our Christian perspective, we are not victims of hurt, shame and weakness either. Jesus took those things on himself when he emptied his life on the cross. Jesus was the victim who sacrificed himself for each of us. We can accept this gift to live anew.

The question of fairness is based upon this seeming dilemma. I would go to hell if I were God. Fortunately God is God whose love is eternal and unconditional. My justice is punishment. God's justice is forgiveness. God's justice forgives sinners. Paul's letter expressed the power of Jesus' cross and the gift he gave; his life for our lives. If God were to drop sinners into hell, that would mean that Jesus died for nothing. Jesus died for each of us. It's always easy to see the badness and mistakes of others. God does not hold us responsible for what they do. Each of us sins. When we do, we find forgiveness in God. To be worried about our sins and what we do is always an indication of the depth of our conscience. We turn to God when we sense our guilt. When we do God forgives with no strings, ifs, ands or buts. Our sense of fairness holds second place to God's Justice.

Our concern with fairness can come when we make comparisons and make judgments. Tommy Smothers, of the Smothers Brothers, always said to his brother Dick, "Mom always liked you best." I always wondered if that was true. The reality was probably simple. Mom liked them differently and she loved them both, deeply. I've never been a parent and have never had to face that dilemma. I have been assigned to many different parishes and have enjoyed belonging to some more than others. Having said this, I have worked just as intensely and diligently in them all. Whereas we may be more compatible with some people and may like some more than others, Jesus has commanded us to love one another. Sometimes we have little choice in

our likes. My favorite meal, as a Kid was Brussels sprouts and liver. My sister is grossed out by them both. We choose to love.

The Fourth Commandment is, "honor your father and mother." As good Catholics we all interpret it as, "obey your father and your mother." When do we dishonor them? What does it mean to be disobedient? When we were kids or if we are kids, how many times did mom or dad have to tell us to take out the trash before we did it or do it? Are we disobedient if we do it? Isn't taking out the trash being obedient? In the mean time there's the grief from mom and dad in all the nagging. There's grief to mom and dad in all the reluctance. We eventually did or do what they want thereby being obedient. The drama is another matter.

In today's gospel Jesus has outlined the same kind of scenario. The younger son was insolent but obedient while the older son lied as well as being disobedient. Both of their responses dishonored their father. Those who have listened to Jesus' parable can get stuck there. Jesus did not focus on the grief given to dad. Jesus did not ask which one honored the father but asked which one was obedient. The younger son gave lip but later did what his dad wanted him to do. Jesus told this story to the chief priests and elders of the community. They got caught with the notion of honor. One can say Jesus spoke to those in power. Jesus spoke truth to power. He did this often. The community's leaders had power and authority. However, they also had responsibility. We may not always be in power but we all have some sort of responsibility. Jesus speaks to us all. How do we hear and heed Jesus' words? To be obedient means to do what we are asked. To honor someone means to make the choice to love them. Perhaps the father needs an apology from both his boys; the one for the lip and the other for the lie. They still must live as a family, together.

Prostitutes and tax collectors will enter the kingdom before you. This is a scary statement. Is Jesus telling us that the scum of the earth will respond to him before we do? All of us struggle to do what's right. Sometimes we succeed and sometimes we fail. If I am more concerned about how you live and not how I live, I have missed Jesus' message. Maybe you and not I will enter the kingdom. It is self-righteousness and not a lack of faith that can prevent someone to enter the kingdom. Paul said it well. Jesus came to save sinners, of whom I am foremost. Each of us depends upon the grace of God. Our goodness comes from God. The words of this gospel are for you and me to hear. We give witness to our faith in Jesus when we do what's right. We also give witness to our faith in turning to Jesus for forgiveness when we sin. There is a line in the Easter hymn, the Exultet. O, happy fault; O, necessary sin of Adam. Without the fall of humanity through the sin of Adam and Eve, salvation through Jesus would not be ours. Sin is necessary for forgiveness and the path to salvation as God planned it to be.

Jesus links our relationship with the relationships we have with one another and with our own self. He gave us the greatest commandment, which is really three. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. That is the greatest, the first commandment. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. Everything in the law and the prophets hangs on these two commandments." We cannot love God without loving our neighbor and we cannot love our neighbor if we cannot love ourselves. Since all of us have trouble loving ourselves and others, are we lost? No, God first loves us. We are all made in God's image and likeness. When God looks at us, we reflect God back. When we look within ourselves we can know God's presence within us. When we look at others we can see God reflected in them. Salvation, faith and the ability to know and return love are all gifts God gives us.

Jesus told us that we are saved through faith. We have faith in God and in Jesus whom God sent. Others need faith in God. Faith is a gift from God. We have received it; others have yet to receive it. It comes to people in God's time, not ours. As we entrust ourselves to God for the forgiveness of our sins, for we have already received God's gift of faith, we can entrust others to God for those same gifts. I write these words and you read them. To do so is by God's grace. As we do so we acknowledge the gift God has given.

May God bless and keep us close in him.

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September 26-27, 2020