

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME A

Some year A liturgical cycles will include the 18th Sunday and others the 18th will be eliminated to make room for the Feast of the Transfiguration. Both are included here.

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Good and gracious God, you invite us to feast on your Word and to come to your table so that we can be nourished by you. May your Holy Spirit open our minds and hearts as we gather for this breaking open of your Word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first and third readings speak of God feeding the hungers of his people. In the second reading, Paul reminds us that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 55:1-3

Today's reading from Isaiah is an invitation to feast on God. There is no cost involved, no bargaining, and no exchange of money. God gives freely of his grace: water, a necessity of life. Wine and milk are signs of abundance and symbolize God's generosity. All who share at God's banquet table will be duly satisfied.

After 70 years of exile, some of the Israelite captives begin to grow accustomed to the Babylonian way of life. Some captives are supposedly spending their money for "what is not bread," and wages for "what fails to satisfy." Some are seeking life from sources other than the one God. Such searching will end in emptiness and futility. The promise of a fulfilled life and a land to live in had been God's promise to David hundreds of years earlier. This promise still remains for all captives who wish to open themselves to it again. All other promises end up leaving them still hungry and thirsty.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 145

This psalm highlights God's goodness, covenant, love and forgiveness, especially as seen in his providential care.

SECOND READING: Romans 8:35, 37-39

These verses may be based upon Paul's own experience described in 2Corinthians 4:8-10: "*We are in difficulties on all sides but never despair; we have been persecuted but never deserted; knocked down but never killed; always wherever we may be, we carry with us in our body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus, too, may always be seen in our body.*" Paul emphasizes the fact that suffering will be a constant threat for the believer, just as it was in the life of Christ. Such sufferings are not to be interpreted as punishment but as the cost of fidelity, which brings about a closer union with God.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:

Matt 14:13-21

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 14:13-21

This miracle is told *six* times in the four Gospels. This underlines its importance in the life of the early church.

Only Matthew mentions that Jesus decides to go to a quiet place *after* he hears of the death of John the Baptist. Jesus most likely has to be aware of what happens to those who ‘speak truth to power.’

But Jesus’ quiet time is interrupted by the crowds hungry for his teaching. Matthew tells us that when Jesus sees the large crowds, he feels compassion for them. Jesus’ need for solitude is overtaken by his care for the people. When Jesus’ disciples encourage him to let the people go so they can buy some food before the local deli closes (!☺), Jesus challenges *them* to give them something to eat. We can almost hear the disciples say, “You must be kidding, Master! How can we feed thousands of people?” Jesus goes on to feed the thousands with a few loaves and fish. Matthew, writing several decades later for mostly Jewish Christians, sees what Jesus did as a fulfillment of how God fed their ancestors in the desert. Also, for Matthew, this miracle points to the Eucharist. The gestures and words are like those used at the Last Supper: “He took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them.” The twelve leftover baskets point to the superabundance of what God offers us, his people.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. Isaiah asks: Why spend money on what will not satisfy? Obviously, we have to spend money on daily necessities, e.g., food and milk. In recent years, how, if any, have your spending habits changed?
3. In the second reading, St. Paul says nothing can separate us from the love of God. Yet in reality, we know things can leave people feeling separated from God’s love. What are some of those circumstances, and what can help us to continue feeling in the love of God when ‘the going gets tough’?

4. In the Gospel, Jesus says to his disciples, “Give them something to eat yourselves.” How can we obey this command of Jesus when it comes to feeding the hungers of others on a spiritual and physical level?

5. What do you hunger for at this stage in your life?

6. Name one thing today’s Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God’s Word and listened to others’ reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, you alone are the bread that satisfies our deepest hungers. Help us to avoid feeding on breads that cannot satisfy.*

RESPONDING TO GOD’S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week’s readings. Suggestions: Take time to reflect on what you hunger for and *how* to respond to it. Share spiritual and material food with the hungry.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we need to pray? Especially pray for all ministries and agencies involved with feeding the starving people of our world. Also pray for spiritual leaders who seek to feed the soul-hungers of people.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Jesus, at your last supper,
you created a lovely way by which you
can continue to feed
our souls in a tangible manner.
May we never lose our hunger for you
in the Eucharist and may we be ready
and willing to share our spiritual and
material bread with others. Amen.*

TRANSFIGURATION OF THE LORD A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *God our Father, in the transfigured glory of Christ your Son, you strengthen our faith by confirming the witness of your prophets, and show us the splendor of your own sons and daughters. As we listen to the voice of your Son, help us to become heirs to eternal life with him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: When the Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord falls on a Sunday, it replaces the Sunday in Ordinary Time. This Sunday's readings focus on the glory of God as seen in Jesus. In the first reading, we behold God's glory through a vision of Daniel speaking to a persecuted people. We celebrate God's glory in the Psalm. Along with the Apostles, we are dazzled as we behold the face of Jesus on Mt. Tabor. We affirm God's glory in the second reading as a promise of the Second Coming.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14

In the book of Daniel, God is presented as the Lord of human history. This reading is a part of a vision in which the Son of Man, who represents the Kingdom of the holy ones of God, comes down from heaven and is given dominion by the "Ancient One," who represents God. The Son of Man in the passage will later be revealed as a messianic figure.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 97

This is a hymn of praise to God as King.

SECOND READING: 2Peter 1:16-19

Peter, among other things, is combating heretics and scoffers who regard Jesus' Resurrection and Second Coming as empty fantasies conjured up by mere human beings to control the lives of the people. Refuting accusations that the early Christians perpetuated a lie, Peter recalls the Transfiguration experience on Mt. Tabor when he heard God himself speak and affirm Jesus as his beloved and favored Son. Hence, Peter's readers should embrace the message that they have been given about Christ as the true Word of God.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:

Matt 17:1-9

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 17:1-9

In this indescribable event, Jesus and his three apostles experience the glory of God. They are, as it were, transported into another reality. The references to Jesus' face dazzling as the sun and his clothes radiant as light are reminiscent of Old Testament theophanies (appearances of God). The presence of Moses and Elijah symbolize "the Law" given to Moses and the prophets. In Jesus, both converge and are brought to fulfillment. The response of the apostles is one of incredible joy and holy terror.

They are so over-awed that they do not want to leave. “Let’s build three booths.” But they are also overcome with fear.

Theologians tell us that the “*experience of the holy*” can cause us to feel overjoyed and, at the same time, terrified. Sometimes, that which we deeply desire, e.g., intimacy with God or with someone else, frightens us. We are afraid of losing ourselves to another.

The heavenly voice tells the apostles to *listen* to Jesus for he is God’s anointed Messiah. In the dark days ahead, this mountaintop experience will sustain both Jesus and the apostles.

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. In the second reading, Peter is dealing with the challenge of people who look at Christian beliefs as empty fantasies. Do you personally know anyone who believes that Christian beliefs are silly? How might we deal with such people?
3. The Apostles’ glimpse of Jesus’ glory sustained them in the dark times. What sustains you when life gets tough?
4. Although few of us may have an extraordinary mystical experience like the Apostles, still all of us get a glimpse. Share one such experience you have had.
5. How can the use of words transform or deform us or others? To what extent do you try to affirm others?
6. Name one thing today’s Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God’s Word and listened to others’ reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

FACILITATOR: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: Jesus please show me how this feast of your Transfiguration, may lead me to a transfiguration of my heart.

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today’s Scriptures. Suggestion: Be on the alert for glimpses of God’s glory in nature and in the events and encounters of daily life.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray?

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Lord Jesus,
if we did not know you,
where would we be?
What would we be like?
What would we become?
What would we be seeking,
pursuing, hungering for?
What would we hope for?
You came as a light into the
darkness of the world,
a light that the darkness
has not overcome. Amen*

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *God of Creation, you make yourself known to us in the gentle breezes and storms of life. You come to reassure us of your saving presence and care for us. Be with us now as we gather to share life and break open your Holy Word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first and third readings teach us that God's presence in the gentle breezes and storms of life calls us to place our trust in him. In the second reading, Paul shares with us his grief concerning his Jewish brothers and sisters who have rejected the Messiah.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: 1Kings 19:9, 11-13

If we are to read the chapters leading up to today's verses, we will discover that Elijah arrives at the cave, a broken and discouraged man. The wicked queen, Jezebel, has run him out of town. In the verses prior to this reading, Elijah asks God to take his life. In response, God tells Elijah to "stand before the Lord as he passes by." God does not appear in the mighty storm or earthquake, but in a tiny breeze – in the silence. In this experience, Elijah discovers that God is now to be found in the Word that comes as a gentle whisper. Elijah hides his face from God because Mosaic tradition has it that one cannot look upon the face of God and live (Ex 33:18-23). In and through this gentle experience of God's presence, Elijah's faith and hope are restored and he returns to his role as God's prophet.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 85

This psalm announces peace and salvation for the faithful remnant of Israel.

SECOND READING: Romans 9:1-5

These verses are an introduction to Chapters 9, 10 and 11 of Romans, in which Paul deals with the issue of the Jews in God's mystery of salvation. Paul is

very proud of his Jewish heritage and, prior to his conversion, saw it as his God-given duty to rid the Israelite faith of Christian heretics. But God opens his eyes and helps him to see that Judaism is a preparation for the fullness of God's revelation. Paul hopes all Jews would come to this conclusion and open their hearts to Jesus. Unfortunately, this is not happening. The rejection of Christ by his own people breaks Paul's heart. His grief is so deep that he is willing to be separated from Christ if this means that his people will accept Christ. Paul lists seven privileges or blessings that his people have received from God which should open their hearts to see in Christ the fullness of God's revelation. Paul's pain is not unlike the pain of people who become separated from family and friends over issues of faith and religion.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:

Matt 14:22-33

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to

us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 14:22-33

This story follows directly after the miracles of the loaves and fishes. In that story, we recall that Jesus' effort to go to a quiet place to pray was interrupted by the crowds. So after his long day of teaching the multitudes, he heads off to the mountain for quiet time.

In the meantime, the disciples get into a boat and head out to sea. But, suddenly, a big storm erupts and they become very frightened. Then without invitation, Jesus comes towards them. At first, they think he is a ghost. Jesus tells them to 'take courage' as they confront a big storm.

Peter asks if he can come to Jesus walking on the water, something that takes a lot of courage. As long as Peter keeps his eyes on Jesus, he does well, but once he focuses on the storm, he starts to sink. Jesus comes to Peter's aid and takes his hand. Our constant challenge, especially in times of fear, is to put our hand in the hand of Jesus. Jesus saves his frightened friend and rebukes him for his 'little faith.' Recognizing Jesus' power over nature, the disciples worship him saying: "*Truly you are the Son of God.*"

Writing his Gospel many decades later, Matthew applies the incident to his congregation. The disciples in the boat represent the infant church. The stormy winds represent the fierce persecution of the early church. While Jesus is not with them physically, he is present spiritually. When all seems lost, Jesus shows up.

The part of the story where Peter walks on water and then sinks could refer to Peter's lapse of faith during the passion and his restoration by Jesus after the Resurrection. It is also symbolic of how any of us could start out courageously and then falter when the storm or crisis comes our way.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. In the first reading, God is teaching Elijah that God is to be experienced in the very small events of life. What are some of the small ways you can and do experience our Lord?
3. In the second reading, Paul is heartbroken because his people have rejected Christ. Have you had a similar experience, e.g., when a family member rejected Christ or the Church? How did that make you feel? How did you handle it?
4. In the Gospel, Jesus' presence allowed Peter to do something he would never dream of doing. How has Jesus enabled you to do something you otherwise would have been afraid to do?
5. Can you recall one big stormy event where you felt Jesus' presence?
6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, thank you for always being present in the stormy moments of life. Deepen my faith in this presence.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestion: Reach out to someone for whom this is a stormy time.

**CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF
THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND
INTERCESSION**

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we need to pray? Pray especially for all who are experiencing a storm in their lives, that they may be able to place their trust in God. Pray for Church leaders and counselors who are expected to bring calm to the storms in people's lives.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Jesus,
just as you beckoned Peter
to come to you,
you invite us to come to you.
It is especially lovely when we can
come to you with our small community
of friends.
Keep us all close to you and
to each other.
Amen.*

TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *God of all creation, in your Word today you tell us that all people are invited to your house of worship. With you there are no outsiders. Open our hearts to a spirit of hospitality to all people of good will. Breathe your Holy Spirit upon us as we gather to share life and your Word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: We live in a world and, unfortunately, in a Church where some are regarded as 'insiders' and others as 'outsiders.' All three readings today remind us of the *universality* and *inclusiveness* of God's love – all are invited to sit at God's table.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 56:1, 6-7

God loves all people and not just his chosen people. As Isaiah writes these words during the post-exilic period of Israel's history, there are lots of foreigners living in Israel. Many Jews, including the leaders, consider such people as outsiders and resist their joining in the worship services even though they are willing to accept the God of Israel and follow his ways. Isaiah challenges such a parochial and narrow mentality. Isaiah deems that if non-Jews "love the name of the Lord, become his servants, observe Sabbath, hold to God's covenant," then they must be welcomed into God's house of prayer for "God's house is for *all* peoples."

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 67

This hymn of praise may have been written in thanksgiving for a plentiful harvest. It is chosen today because of its strong *universalistic* strain, thereby connecting it with the first and third readings.

SECOND READING: Romans 11:13-15, 29-32

These verses are a continuation of last week's reading, which opens Paul's discussion on the fate of Jews who reject Jesus. Paul is hoping that the crowds of Gentiles joining the New Way will arouse so much

envy in his fellow Jews that they will also accept Jesus and his message. Paul expresses his hope and profound desire that all who have initially rejected Jesus will, at some time in the future, accept him. Like Isaiah and Jesus, Paul wants *all* people to be included in God's saving plan.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Matt 15:21-28

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: 15:21-28

The biggest pastoral issue in the early Church has to do with the antagonistic treatment of Gentiles, especially those who embrace Jesus and his New Way. In Jesus' time, Gentiles are despised by Jews and seen as "good fuel for the fires of hell."

Matthew has Jesus confine his mission “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But Jesus is also open to showing God’s mercy to non-Jews. We can feel the tension in the story as the Gentile woman refuses to go away. The disciples want Jesus to get rid of this “blathering woman” who keep yelling at them as she searches for deliverance for her daughter from an evil spirit. The story even shows Jesus’ reluctance to deal with her. Worse still, he calls the woman a “dog”! What’s going on here?

Some commentators try to get Jesus off the hook for his nasty remark, but perhaps we need to accept the fact that Jesus, in this case, is acting like a normal first century Jew who called Gentiles ‘dogs.’

However, the real point of this story is not Jesus and his seeming rudeness, but the woman and her wonderful tenacity and faith. She was simply not going to be put off, even by rudeness. Her comeback plea is so humble and yet so firm that even the Son of God cannot say ‘no’ to her. Fr. Dennis McBride notes: “*The Canaanite woman is the only person in the Gospel who has the wit to outwit Jesus. In the end, she gets what she was seeking.*”

(Used with permission granted by Denis McBride CSSR, *Seasons of the Word.*)

Many scholars believe that the woman’s faith helped Jesus to see that his mission was not just to the ‘lost sheep of the house of Israel’ but to all peoples—Jews and Gentiles alike.

The tenacity and persistence of the woman should be a source of inspiration to all people who are in any way oppressed and put down. The Canaanite woman lives in a male-dominated society. She is a foreigner who ventures alone into a Jewish milieu. When confronted by a distant – and should we say rude – Jesus, she does not sulk. Rather, she persists until she gets what she wants. Despite her background, she ends up as one of the most highly commended persons in the Gospel. Christ came for all. God really wants all at the table. The woman’s wonderful faith in Jesus’ saving power is the central point of this story.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first

question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.

2. The first and third readings are about God’s *inclusiveness*. How inclusive are you? Are there individuals and groups that you prefer not to mix with?

3. For hundreds of years, African Americans were not welcome in our Church. How inclusive is our Church at this time? Who or what groups may not feel welcome in our Church?

4. In the Gospel, the woman shows great perseverance and faith. She was not going to be denied. Can you remember a time when your perseverance and/or faith gained you something you would not have gotten without those qualities?

5. Share a time when your perseverance failed, but your faith in Our Lord’s power prevailed.

6. Name one thing today’s Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

RESPONDING TO GOD’S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week’s readings. Suggestion: Reflect on who you now *exclude* from your circle of friends. If there is some group or individual(s), begin to pray about how you can have a change of heart.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God’s Word and listened to others’ reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Lord Jesus, you loved everyone without exception. If at this time, I am excluding someone from my circle of love, help me to have a change of heart.*

**CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF
THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND
INTERCESSION**

Facilitator: Pray for all who may feel excluded in our family, Church and nations. Pray for the tenacity and faith of the woman in today's Gospel.

*What counts is not necessarily
the size of the dog in the fight –
but the size of the fight in the dog.*

- Dwight D. Eisenhower

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Lord Jesus,
you love all people without exception.
You love us even when we fail you
and show prejudice. Change our hearts.
Make them big and compassionate
like yours.
Amen.*

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *God of Creation, you have placed certain persons in roles of authority in our world, Church and homes. Give these brothers and sisters wise and understanding hearts that they may guide us well. Breathe your Holy Spirit upon us as we gather to share life and your Word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first and third readings speak about the conferral of keys of authority. In the second reading, Paul bows down before the authority of God whose ways are inscrutable and full of wisdom.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 22:15, 19-23

The prophet Isaiah is delivering God's judgment to a disgraced public official, Shebna, who supports Israel's military alliance with one pagan nation (Egypt) against another (Assyria). The failed alliance is disastrous for Israel, which the prophet attributes to a failure to trust in the Lord alone. Shebna will therefore be removed from his position of trust and honor and a successor named. The Lord promises, "I will give over to him your authority... I will place the key of the House of David on Eliakim's shoulder" (Is 22:21, 22). The basis for conferring this symbolic key of power is, of course, Eliakim's perceived trust in the Lord God alone.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 138

In this hymn of thanksgiving, the Psalmist, unlike Shebna, places his confidence in God.

SECOND READING: Romans 11:33-36

This is an acclamation of praise to God. Paul's hymn comes at the end of his discussion of Israel's place in God's plan of salvation in light of the Christ-event. Although Paul anguishes over the fact that many Jews have not accepted Christ, he asserts that their slowness to believe has led to the Gentile mission. Ultimately, Jews as well as Gentiles will receive God's mercy. When faced with the unexplainable, unfathomable and unexpected turn of events in human history as it

pertains to Jews as well as Gentiles, Paul's only response is awe.

God's riches or fullness, his wisdom and knowledge, are the subject of verses 33. *God's riches* convey the sense of overflowing abundance of a God whose very being, whose love and fidelity, can neither be contained nor limited. As the Scripture attests, *God's ways of doing things are often not our ways.* One can only respond with awe to God's mysterious ways. *God's knowledge and understanding* surpass all human designs. *God's wisdom* is something we receive as a gift from him.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Matt 16:13-20

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 16:13-20

The Gospel opens with Jesus asking the disciples "Who do people say that I am?" They respond that people see him as a prophet. Then Jesus asks the

disciples who they think he is. Peter, in a moment of a great insight, speaks up on behalf of the other disciples: “*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*” Peter probably says more than he knows.

Then Jesus shifts the focus from himself to Peter. After Peter names the *identity* and *mission* of Jesus, Jesus unfolds the *identity* and *mission* of Peter. Jesus confers a new title on Peter. Going forward, Peter will be the *foundation stone* of a new people (the Church).

This Gospel shows that the primacy of Peter (which each of his successors holds) is not something that was invented by the Church later on. It goes back to the mind and will of Jesus himself.

The failures of popes throughout history do not contradict Jesus’ promise that “the gates of hell would not prevail against the Church.” Peter himself failed the Lord. In giving authority and primacy to the one who will deny him, Jesus is communicating to us that his Church was not established on human strength, but on his own divine love and faithfulness. The Church’s true foundation is Christ himself. The Pope is servant, not his substitute.

The words “binding” and “loosing” refers to the Church’s authority to legislate, e.g., to name behaviors that lead to life and to forbid behaviors that lead us away from Christ. In addition the power to bind and loose refers to the Church’s authority to excommunicate a member just as Paul did. (See 1Cor 5:5).

Jesus forbids the disciples to speak of this event because it would be misunderstood prior to Pentecost when the Holy Spirit will enlighten the people.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. In the second reading, Paul speaks about the ‘inscrutable’ and ‘unsearchable’ ways of God. For you, what might be an example of these words?
3. Jesus asks his disciples the question: “*Who do you say I am?*” How would you answer this question?

4. One could say Peter was the least qualified of Jesus’ disciples to head up the Church. He was uneducated, impulsive, a coward when things got tough. So why do you think Jesus chose him?

5. It has been said: ‘God does not call the qualified, but he qualifies those he calls.’ Have you seen that work in your life?

6. Name one thing today’s Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God’s Word and listened to others’ reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, you founded our Church to continue your work on earth. Bless our church family and help me to do my part to make our church family a shining light in our world.*

RESPONDING TO GOD’S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week’s readings. Suggestion: As each of us wields some authority in our homes and communities, spend time thinking about how you use your authority.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: Pray for Church and government leaders. Pray that they will always seek and do what is truthful and just.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Loving God,
lead us to a deeper knowledge and
understanding of your Son Jesus.
We trust that this understanding
will lead us to a deeper commitment
on our part to continue your work
here on earth. Amen.*

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Loving and challenging God, in today's readings you place before us the challenge of carrying the Cross so that we can become more like you. Help us to find meaning in the crosses of daily life. Breathe your Spirit upon us as we share life and your Word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first and third readings speak about the cost of faithfulness. The passion or sufferings of Jeremiah foreshadow the passion of Jesus, which he speaks about in the Gospel. In the second reading, Paul speaks about offering ourselves as a "living sacrifice" to God.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Jeremiah 20:7-9

In the Book of Jeremiah, we find five intensely autobiographical pieces, often called the "confessions of Jeremiah" (11:18, 12:6, 15:10-21, 17:14-18, 18:18-23, 20:7-18). In these so-called 'confessions,' Jeremiah bares his heart to us, sharing with us the cost of discipleship and his struggle with God. They give us an insight into Jeremiah's "dark night of the soul" (a phrase coined by the Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross, to speak about those times when one feels abandoned by God or feels no sense of his presence). The 'confessions' also speak of Jeremiah's personal misgivings about his ability to be an effective messenger of God in the public forum. We are very fortunate to have this intensely personal sharing into the soul of one of Israel's greatest prophets.

During a turbulent time in Israel's history, Jeremiah is called by God to deliver a message that his people do not want to hear. Jeremiah must denounce corruption in the temple liturgy and condemn the people's dabbling in foreign cults, chastise them for their many breaches of the covenant, and castigate them for ignoring the poor. Prophets are not known for their "feel good" messages.

Today's verses open with Jeremiah sharing with us that in his call, he is duped or seduced by God (see

Jer 1:4-6). He feels God has 'put one over on him' and he has allowed it to happen. In ways, he feels sorry for saying 'yes' to God.

As a sensitive and caring soul, Jeremiah does not enjoy being the "object of laughter" and having "everyone mock him." But the people beat him up and throw him in a dark dungeon. Being a messenger of God is no fun (at least not for Jeremiah). On the contrary, it only brings him "derision and reproach all day long." All of this leads Jeremiah to consider "early retirement." "I say to myself, I will not speak in his name anymore." But the divine fire received at his call cannot be extinguished. For Jeremiah, the only thing worse than being God's prophet is saying "no" to God's call.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 63A

This beautiful psalm expresses the author's intense longing to be in the presence of God. Most likely, the psalm expresses the thoughts and feelings of Jeremiah on his better days.

SECOND READING: Romans 12:1-2

Having spoken eloquently in chapters 1-8 on what God has done for us in Christ Jesus, Paul now, in chapters 12-13, calls for a moral response. In acknowledgment of God's goodness, followers of Christ are to seek to make Christian values permeate

every aspect of their lives. Authentic liturgy is not something that just takes place in Church. Ideally, our *whole life is an act of worship to God*. Offering ourselves to God means conforming to his will and not to the temptations of the world.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:

Matt 16:21-27

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 16:21-27

We have here a sequel to last week's Gospel, with Peter once again as the main character. Last week, Jesus *praises* Peter for recognizing him as the Messiah. This week, Jesus *rebukes* Peter for suggesting that he avoid the Cross. Here, the 'rock' becomes "a stumbling block." His remark to have Jesus avoid the Cross puts him in a league with Satan. While Peter recognizes Jesus as the Messiah who is to bring about the new reign of God, he clearly has no idea, or maybe has a false idea, of how Jesus will exercise his mission as Messiah or accomplish the reign of God. Peter has yet to learn that Jesus will not be a regal warrior type of hero, but a humble, suffering Messiah.

Then Jesus goes on to speak about the cost and rewards of discipleship. The disciples must be willing to embrace the crosses of life and die to themselves, i.e., to their false self – proud, vain, self-seeking. Jesus, not oneself, must be the center of one's life. In dying to the desires of the false self, we will discover and grow into our true (Christ) self. The Gospel concludes with a reminder that ahead for each of us is a day of reckoning. Our words and deeds will have eternal consequences. Later in Matthew's Gospel (25:31-46), believers will learn the criteria upon which judgment will be administered.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. Jeremiah felt 'duped' by God. What do you think he meant by that? Have you ever felt that life without your 'yes to God' would be easier?
3. Jeremiah compares his relationship to God as "a fire burning in his heart." What might be an image you would use to describe your relationship with him?
4. In the second reading, Paul tells us that we must not "let our lives be conformed to this world." Can you name some 'ways of the world' that it can be easy enough for Christians to embrace?
5. The 'Covid-19 event' is and may continue to be a big cross for many people to carry. How did it most impact your life?
6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, following you and your ways is sometimes very hard. In those times, help me to feel your strength.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestion: Be aware of how you are or may be embracing worldly ways. Do what you can to push back against them.

**CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF
THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND
INTERCESSION**

Keep praying especially for all whose lives are impacted by Covid-19.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Jesus,
in the first reading today,
Jeremiah compares his relationship
to you to a
'fire burning in his heart.'
Help us to burn with love for you.
Amen.*

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Loving God, you created us for a relationship with you. When we stray from you, you call us back. When our brothers and sisters begin to follow a sinful lifestyle, you call us to help them see their erring ways. Give us the wisdom and courage to help each other to follow your ways. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: All three readings speak about the importance of right relationships and personal responsibility. The first and third readings address the issue of how to respond to someone in our church family who is walking a wrong and sinful path. In the second reading, Paul tells us that in following the way of love, we fulfill the law.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: EZEKIEL 33:7-9

These verses contain a message for the prophet himself and for his pastoral responsibilities towards his own people now living in exile in Babylon. Ezechiel compares his role to that of a *sentinel*. A sentinel standing on top of a city wall would alert the people about any approaching danger.

Once the *sentinel* sounds a warning, the responsibility for action lies in the hands of the people. In a similar way, the prophet's task is to warn the sinner of the impending disaster resulting from sin. Once the prophet speaks a word of warning, it is up to the sinner to listen to the word and act. If the prophet fails to issue the warning, he will be held responsible for the disaster that will befall the sinner.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 95

The message imparted in the first and third reading: "If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts," echoes the call to conversion.

SECOND READING: Romans 13:8-10

As noted last week, Chapters 12-13 are often called the 'moral section' of Paul's long letter. In this reading, Paul speaks to us about the centrality of love when it comes to following Christ, and living a normal life. Christian love must be sincere, without hypocrisy, and

must manifest itself in heartfelt affection for one's brothers and sisters in the community—even for one's enemies—and anyone in need. In the context of today's readings, it can also be noted that genuine love sometimes calls us to reach out to an erring brother or sister with the purpose of drawing him/her back into God's ways.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Matt 18:15-20

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 18:15-20

In this Gospel, Jesus outlines for his disciples what one must do if a brother in the community sins against him. He gives three steps:

- The first step is to reach out to the brother, state the offense, and allow the brother to privately repent of

the wrong he has done. Notice in the first step that one is *not* to go to others to complain about the offender.

- If that does not work, the offended person should take one or two other members (ideally guys who are 6 feet tall 😊) of the community to help in a reconciliation effort.
- If the second step does not work, the offender should be brought before the whole community. If he continues to be unrepentant, “treat him as you would a Gentile or tax collector,” i.e., as someone who has a disdain for the Gospel. Some scholars say that Matthew is telling his audience to excommunicate the unrepentant sinner. Others think that Jesus wants us to treat the sinner with unconditional love because that is how he treated Gentiles and tax collectors. Jesus is saying that if someone sins, no effort must be spared to bring about the reform of the sinner and keep him in the community. Jesus further says when the community or even two or three members of the community prays about this issue, their decision will be affirmed in heaven.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. Have you ever tried to intervene in the life of another adult who was on a destructive path or was about to make a decision that you believed would have destructive consequences? If so, how was that experience for you?
3. In the second reading, Paul quotes the Law, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Discuss how admonishing the sinner is an act of love.
4. When someone hurts us, we have three options.
 - Go to the offender, as today’s Gospel tells us.
 - Complain about the offender to someone else.
 - Keep the hurt inside and do nothing about it.

Which option are you most likely to follow? Why?

5. If you have grown in your ability to confront another, what has helped you grow in this way?

6. Name one thing today’s Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God’s Word and listened to others’ reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, reconciling life’s hurts is one of the toughest parts of your teaching. Help me to grow in this area, to develop my ability and willingness to bring healing to a broken or wounded relationship. Amen.*

RESPONDING TO GOD’S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week’s readings. Suggestions: If you need to confront someone about something, consider doing it. First pray and ask for the right words to say. Be loving yet direct in your approach and avoid words that are condemnatory. If someone you know is clearly on the wrong path, pray for the courage to confront that person.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for the grace to grow in your ability to confront and deal with wrongdoing in yourself or others.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Lord Jesus,
during your time on earth,
you found yourself in several
sticky situations.
You modeled for us the power to
speak up when we should.
But sometimes it may be better
not to speak.
May your Holy Spirit be with us
to help us to know when to speak up
and when to be quiet.
Mother Mary, un-doer of knots,
pray for us. Amen.*

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Merciful God, in today's readings, you challenge us to forgive life's hurts and not bottle them up in our heart. You forgive us over and over. Help us to offer the same forgiveness to others. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first and third readings build on last week's readings which dealt with the handling of disputes among individuals within the community. Both readings give us a strong message on forgiveness. If we are to be like God, we must forgive each other over and over. In the second reading, Paul addresses a dispute that persists between the Gentile and Jewish Christians.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Sirach 27:30; 28:7

As you may know, the first reading of our three Sunday readings is chosen to connect or underline the message of the Gospel. Sometimes this is easy to see, sometimes it is not. The connection this Sunday is easy to notice. Both this reading and the Gospel illustrate the connection between forgiving and being forgiven: Sirach asks:

Could anyone nourish anger against another and expect healing from the Lord?

The reason a person does not receive healing from the Lord is that the sinner holds onto grudges and is unrepentant.

*Wrath and anger are hateful things
yet the sinner hugs them tight
If one who is flesh cherishes wrath,
who will forgive his sins?*

As recipients of God's love and mercy, we are also expected to show love and mercy to others.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 103

This psalm is a meditation on the merciful face of God, which the Israelites have come to know so well through their history of sin and forgiveness.

SECOND READING: Romans 14:7-9

Paul is in the middle of commenting on some small disagreements between church members in his Roman community. Some are Jewish Christians and some are Gentile Christians. They have different ideas about what one is allowed to eat and how one should fast.

Paul urges this community to refrain from judging each other, for all are seeking to serve the Lord. If some people are abstaining for certain foods out of love for the Lord, then we should not judge. Judgement is God's business, not ours. Our job is to love people. God's job is to judge them.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:

Matt 18:21-38

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 18:21-35

The Gospel opens with Peter seeking to place a limit on how often he must forgive someone who offends him over and over. Surely, forgiving someone seven times should be enough. But Jesus disagrees, saying he should forgive not seven times but seventy times seven. In other words, Jesus puts no limit on forgiveness.

To illustrate his point further, Jesus tells a parable, often called the kingdom parable because he tells how things are to be in the new kingdom that he is inaugurating. In the parable, the king stands for God, and the servant stands for all of us. The king shows *great mercy* to the servant who owes a *huge* debt. The expectation is that the forgiven servant will also show mercy to the one who owes him much less. When this does not happen, the king (representing God) is not happy.

The parable grounds forgiveness in the nature of God. We are to heed the intent of the parable at its conclusion: it solemnly warns us that we must fervently pray for strength to resist the temptation to get even with those who have hurt us, and pray for the grace to reflect the majestic generosity of the Kingdom of God. *

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. What are the obstacles to forgiving others? Name as many obstacles as possible, e.g., pride, the belief that someone does not deserve mercy, hardness of heart, etc., then name the primary obstacle that you may face in forgiving a hurt.
3. What helps you to forgive life's hurts? What might help you to overcome whatever you name as the primary obstacle to forgiving life's hurts?
4. In the second reading, Paul is urging people not to judge others. In your opinion, what can cause us to be judgmental of others?

5. Forgiveness doesn't mean that you have to put up with intolerable behavior. If a spouse or anyone else abuses us, we should do everything in our power to resist such behavior. Discuss.

6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, forgiving big hurts is one of the most challenging things asked of a disciple. When faced with this issue, help me to always remember how frequently you have had to forgive my big and small sins.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestion: If there is someone whom you have not forgiven, begin to pray for that person and for the grace to forgive him/her.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray especially for all who have little or no desire to forgive those who have hurt them.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

Jesus, you know the way I feel about _____.

You know my lack of desire to forgive. You know that all I want to do is to get even with him. But I also know that holding onto a hardened, unforgiving heart is bad for my body, mind, and spirit. It hurts me more than it hurts my offender. It also hurts my relationship with you.

Jesus, I admit my helplessness and powerlessness when it comes to even thinking about forgiving____. But I also know that all things are possible for those who cooperate with your grace. With Saint Paul, I believe that I can do all things in you who strengthens me. Empower me, Jesus, to do this work of forgiveness. Place within my heart the desire to forgive _____. I find it so hard to even make that request because my heart has so much venom toward _____. But I make the request, however feebly, oping that you will give me the grace to do what I am powerless to do for myself.

*For more on forgiveness, please see Father Tobin's book, "How to Forgive Yourself and Others" Ligouri Publications available on Amazon.

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Loving God, we gather together to share life and to seek your ways which are always beyond what we can understand. May your Holy Spirit breathe upon us as we reflect on the Word you place before us today. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: In the first reading, we are told that “*God’s ways are not our ways.*” In the Gospel, we have a concrete example of this truth as we see how the latecomer to the vineyard is treated. In the second reading, Paul speaks of his desire to have Christ exalted in him.

Let us listen to God’s Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 55:6-9

This reading, issued to the Israelite exiles in Babylon, is a call to worship, a call to conversion, and a call to believe in God’s ways. It begins with an exhortation to “*seek the Lord, while he may be found...and while he is still near.*” We can assume that the author does not literally believe that God is moving soon to a distant place where he cannot be found. God can always be found and he is *always* near, but our dulled hearts may not recognize his presence. Perhaps the writer is saying, “Seek God while you have some spiritual sense in you. Seek him before you lose all belief in him.”

The writer issues a call to the sinner to turn from his sinful ways. The reading concludes with a reference to God’s mysterious ways. In general, this verse is a reminder to us that we do not understand the ways of God in our lives or world. But in the context of today’s Gospel, where a latecomer receives the same wages as the one who has worked all day, the saying is probably a reference to God’s great mercy. Despite the fact that we may have been huge sinners and have spent most of our lives in a state of indifference to God, he will have mercy on us if we turn from our sinful ways. This way of acting is probably unlike how we would behave if we were God.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 145

This is a psalm of praise to God for his mercy.

SECOND READING: Philippians 1:20-24, 27

For this and the next three Sundays, the second reading is taken from St. Paul’s Letter to the Philippians. This is an amazing reading. Paul is writing from prison and is not sure whether he will get out alive. But it does not matter because for him, “life is Christ and death is gain.” If he gets out of prison, that’s okay too; it will give him another opportunity to preach the Gospel. The bottom line for Paul is to serve Christ and his Gospel. He urges his readers to have the same attitude.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:

Matt 20:1-16

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 20:1-16

This Gospel is perhaps one of the most puzzling and disliked parables in the Bible because of its *perceived* grave injustice. Some scholars say that the parable is told as a response to a question Peter raised on behalf of his fellow apostles: What reward would they receive for giving up everything to work in the Lord's vineyard?

In this parable, no one is lazy. The men are standing around only because no one has hired them. But once hired, they go to work and are paid the *agreed* wage at the end of the day. However, their sense of justice is upset when those hired later in the day receive the same amount. They object to the fact that the late workers are getting more than they should be paid. In truth, however, the landowner has not been unfair to the all-day workers, having paid them the *agreed* wage. Rather, he decides to be very *generous* to the latecomers; hence, the second to the last verse of today's Gospel: "*Are you envious because I am generous?*" Envy on the part of Jesus' followers is unwarranted since every gift of God completely comes from his generosity, and not from any individual's ability or activity. God's justice looks more like human mercy.

The parable has two other applications: one to Matthew's community living several decades after Christ, and to us living 2,000 years later.

In regards to Matthew's community made up of mostly Jewish Christians and some Gentile Christians, the farmer may have looked upon the Gentiles as the workers going out late in the day and receiving the same wages or in their same spiritual blessings as the Jews who have been faithful to God all their lives. In this case, the Jewish Christians may have erroneously believed that one *earned* salvation by good works. Salvation is a *gift* and not something we earn.

For us, the issue might be death-bed conversions like the good thief whom some, maybe many, believed 'stole heaven.' We do not earn heaven by good works but, rather, by opening our hearts to God's saving grace. Whether we have served him from sunrise to sunset or enlisted for service only at the eleventh hour, God blesses us with his bounty not because we

have *earned* his goodness, but because of who he is, namely, a God of mercy and compassion.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. How easy or hard is it for us to accept and embrace a God whose ways are sometimes not our ways?
3. Paul's attitude towards life and death is quite astounding. What might help us to get to a point where we too could say: "For me, death is gain"?
4. Do you ever struggle with the whole issue of fairness in life, e.g., bad or irreligious people doing well, and really good people experiencing a lot of pain and hardship?
5. How big or small is your God? Do you think that career criminals, dictators, or rapists who turn to God on their deathbed (e.g., the good thief) should be admitted to heaven?
6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, your ways of seeing people turns our imagination upside down, for your ways are not our ways. When we are stuck in ways of thinking that do not reflect your values, open our eyes and help us to see as you.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestion: Seek to enter into God's compassion for those who come late and do less.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Lord, help us to look at others with the same kindness with which you look upon us, so that we may rejoice in the salvation of all people, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

The Weaver

*My life is but a weaving
between my Lord and me.
I cannot choose the colors
He worketh steadily.
Oft time He weaveth sorrow
and I in foolish pride
forget He sees the upper,
and I, the underside.
Not 'til the loom is silent
and the shuttles cease to fly,
shall God unroll the canvas
and explain the reason why.
The dark threads are as needful
in the Weaver's skillful hand
as the threads of gold and silver
in the pattern He has planned.*

(Author Unknown)