

Learning to Live Justly; Learning to Live the Eucharist

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Thus says the LORD:
Observe what is right, do what is just;
for my salvation is about to come,
my justice about to be revealed.
—Isaiah 56:1, excerpt from the First Reading on the
Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Scripture readings and prayer texts of the Sundays in Ordinary Time during the summer help define the meaning of the Eucharist in our time. The first verse from the reading from Isaiah on the Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time can deepen our interpretation of the Gospel narratives during this period. This verse supports Jesus' words, "Come to me, all who labor and are burdened" (Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Matthew 11:25–30) and the proclamation in the parable to continue to search for the "pearl of great price" (Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Matthew 13:44–52). As the readings from Matthew's account of the Gospel during these months speak of love and mercy and the restoration of all human relationships, they urge us to speak out for the vulnerable.

In our celebration of the Eucharist, we are offered a glimpse of Kingdom justice and peace. The Real Presence of Christ feeds the human heart, offers forgiveness, and satisfies our need for love and purpose. Believing that through his compassion, God offers us Christ in the Eucharist, we leave the Mass challenged to nurture people who starve to be heard as well as those with physical hunger. As liturgists, we seek to prepare our liturgies so that the parish celebration will bring the assembly to link the sacred Eucharist with their mission to work for justice in the world.

Within the liturgy we hear and see the connection between prayer and service, Eucharist and justice. When we proclaim the mercy of Christ in the Penitential Act of the Mass, we pray for all of our relationships to be restored. This restoration of our lives through God's compassion prepares us for a world in which many await mercy from the powerful. During the liturgy, God feeds us from the table of bountiful love. We go out into the world with what we have received and offer forgiveness and love to others. Once we have served, we are called back to the Eucharist. The continual cycle of prayer and service at the core of the mission of the Church brings us closer to God and to one another.

ALL THAT IS HIDDEN WILL BE REVEALED

During preparation for the liturgies throughout the summer, parish staff and liturgical ministers may want to spend time in



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By remaining close to the revelation of love proclaimed at the altar, the assembly can bring healing and hope to the world.

reflection on this verse from Isaiah 56:1. Pondering the words of the prophet will strengthen them as they seek to illuminate the message of justice in our worship. It can be easy to tuck away that message and allow parishioners to limit the Eucharist to private devotion. In the Eucharist, though, the Kingdom of God is in our midst. Injustice, hardship, poverty, and division will become one and redeemed in Christ Jesus. In the Gospel on the

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Jesus praises the Father for revealing to the little ones what has been hidden from the wise and learned. Through Christ in the Eucharist, God reveals to us what has been hidden.

From one Eucharist to another, we are challenged to live out the Paschal Mystery and become a people of hope. During my early years in the priesthood, listening to the Gospel account from Matthew proclaimed during this part of Ordinary Time, I learned to take the liturgy into the world. Having been nourished by the Real Presence of Christ, I sought to bring the source of Kingdom life to others, no matter how challenging. The Eucharist shoved me into hospital rooms of people dying of AIDS and compelled me to listen to people waiting in soup lines. Once grounded in these ministries, I realized that Jesus was present in these places and that the Scriptures showed him breaking down barriers and restoring dignity. We enter such areas only because we have realized our need for God and allowed ourselves to be transformed through the liturgy. By remaining close to the revelation of love proclaimed at the altar, we are able to bring healing and hope to the world.

As the People of God, we come to the Eucharist hungry. Humbly, we turn over our questions about the meaning of life as we open ourselves to the power of God's love. Returning again and again to the liturgy, we persist in our search for union with God. Such persistence is rewarded, as the Gospel reading on the Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time shows. In that Gospel reading, (Matthew 15:21-28), the Canaanite woman remains in Jesus' presence, seeking to be fed, even after being rebuked. This mother of a girl tormented by a demon is tired and frustrated but comes to Jesus aware that he can cure her daughter. She does not give up on Jesus when he tells her, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

LORD, HELP ME

Instead of leaving, the woman says, "Lord, help me," words I often find on my lips. This mother's straightforward prayer is within the heart of believers encountering sorrow. As we prepare the liturgy, we can take to heart the woman's words, realizing that within the assembly are people searching for help. The hospitality of the liturgical ministers, the words of the homilist, the intercessions of the Universal Prayer all can nurture parishioners to look to God for assistance in their lives rather than the alternatives the secular world offers. Those who are burdened long to believe it will matter when they say, "Lord, help me." When they utter those words from the heart, they realize that nothing else lasts except the love that God has for us—this love that is the center of our liturgy on earth.

This Gospel text challenges us to keep one eye on those who suffer and the other on the fidelity of Christ's compassion. With each reading of this pericope, I am joyful that the woman's persistence changes Jesus' mind so that he replies to her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." In my prayer, I often sit with her and listen to her commanding plea that brings Jesus to cure her daughter. I listen to her when I am up against a wall about how to help a family who

has lost their child to cancer. As we celebrate the Eucharist, we seek to nurture such faith so that the assembly will put their trust in God. The degree of trust that this woman had is needed by the faithful who seek to make sense of suffering and violence. While trying to make sense of their human experience, they need the Canaanite woman's courage and tenacity.

GO IN PEACE, GLORIFYING THE LORD BY YOUR LIFE

The Canaanite woman stood by her daughter, a loved one who needed help. With my entire being, I want to believe that she would also confront Jesus about someone unrelated to her. As we minister in the world, we stand among people we do not know to help Jesus cure, forgive, and love. This aspect of our ministry, putting love into practice, is not just for our loved ones or centered only in the community we serve. We work for people we do not know, the poor, the oppressed, the immigrant, the refugee, and the abused. From our communal prayer in the liturgy, we go forth to work for justice. Time and again, the liturgy transforms us to realize the dignity of all human life. It has transformed us to come to God, saying, "Lord, help me," as we seek to be the Eucharist for others. Such reliance on God was evident when I ministered in a parish that served people who live outside. The volunteers faced their first day hesitantly. However, when they developed a relationship with people and listened to their stories, these strangers became real people and their need for support, food, shelter, and health care were seen as genuine. The volunteers began not only to serve strangers but also to pray for them at the Eucharist.

Isaiah says that justice is about to come. We do not need to wait for our longing. This justice arrives in the person of Christ Jesus. We celebrate his arrival at every Eucharist. When our eyes are opened and our ears are attuned, we discover the miracle of Jesus' care, love, forgiveness, and healing power within our communities. Especially as pastoral ministers, we understand that even people with great faith do not always receive the help they seek. The prayer of the liturgy reaches out to the stranger as the community leaves the parish to glorify the Lord to all they meet. With persistence in prayer, the assembly serves the vulnerable. Our liturgical prayer brings the faithful to believe that justice shall win and hope shall prevail. The work and ministry of disciples is never complete. We await the day when mercy blankets the hearts of people who wait with us for the tenderness of the Lord. ♦

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