

Liturgy of the Word Reflection
Monday, July 13, 2020
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The onset of Covid-19 and the global pandemic has sent us into a tailspin of sorts. In mid-March, states were shutting down and requesting that we stay at home and shelter in place. Only essential workers were to leave their homes and our trips outside our homes were to be limited. We were asked to do three simple things – wear a mask, maintain social distances and wash our hands frequently. There were some new learnings, but one of the most significant things that happened was being impelled to act in order to protect the health and safety of all people. While the pandemic disproportionately affects minority populations, it has cut across boundaries in many ways. When this time of dealing with the pandemic was coupled with the tragic death of George Floyd, another call to action was precipitated as we came face-to-face with systemic racism.

The readings for Monday in the 15th week of ordinary time are very clear in that they challenge us to act. The reading from Isaiah tells the story of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and the fact that these two cities failed to treat the poor and the needy justly. As a result, these two cities were destroyed. In this first reading, we hear that the people brought sacrifices to God as the law required. The response of God was that these sacrifices are worthless if injustices are present. The prophet uses strong words to communicate the message of God – God has had enough. God loathes, detests and closes eyes to the prayers that are offered without meaning. The message of God to the people is clear – these sacrifices are meaningless if evil continues to exist. God's words to the people are clear. We are to learn to do good, to make justice our aim. We are to hear the orphan's plea and to defend the widow. What better message can we hear today? What words can be more challenging?

The psalmist in the responsorial psalm re-enforces this message. The Beloved finds fault with what some call holy, the offerings of greed and war. The desire for greed and power come from a place of darkness. The psalmist acknowledges that we often rob the poor with greed and prejudice. We need to be reminded that we are one in truth and love and that all of life is a sacred gift. What right do we have to offer empty prayers?

With a focus on mission, families may be divided as we hear from the Gospel of Matthew. How many of us do not talk about politics with our families with the fear that such conversations would divide us? In the Gospel reading, families are redefined not by birth, but by doing the will of God, being faithful to God's call in our lives. In the days of Rome, if people threatened those who had control over society they were crucified. Our way of life is the way of the cross, perhaps suffering pain, social rejection, humiliation and perhaps marginalization for speaking the truth as we have come to believe. The call from the readings today is to move beyond giving alms or making sacrifices to acting – speaking truth to power.

Jesus tells us whoever loses one's life for the sake of the Gospel will find it. We will not lose our eternal reward if we "give a cup of cold water to one of the little ones to drink because [we are] disciples of Jesus." This reference to the little ones reminds us of the

vulnerability of the minority who may challenge the status quo, those who may be cast aside by injustices, perhaps by systemic racism. When Jesus was finished speaking to the people, he went away from that place to teach and preach in various towns. Only after the death and resurrection of Jesus do the disciples have the strength and belief in the Gospel message to go forth and preach the Gospel by their lives.

Christine Paintner, in *The Soul's Slow Ripening*, tells us that in the Celtic tradition, thresholds are the places where heaven and earth are closer together, and the veil between the two worlds is very thin. These thresholds are challenging because they demand that we step into the in-between place of letting go of what has been, while awaiting what is still to come. Thresholds are graced places of transformation. These times of the global pandemic and social unrest are such times, times of transformation.

Last week, the Leadership Council met to discuss the plan for having memorial liturgies for the sisters who passed away during the time of sheltering in place. As we made one decision, we wondered about the implications, pondered what might be the response of the community. We finally landed on the fact that we are making the best decision we can at this time, given all that is unknown. I remarked that I am feeling hemmed in by all that is unknown. Yet, perhaps as in the Celtic tradition, we are experiencing the thin places, a place of transformation. This time of Covid-19 and the time of social unrest challenge us; and the readings for today also challenge us – to not be overwhelmed by the unknown, to not remain silent in the face of racism, to act in a manner that will give witness to the Gospel. Whether it is a response to the global pandemic of doing all we can to ensure the safety of all or it is speaking out or marching to show that Black lives matter, the time is now to have our voices heard.