

exploring

THE SUNDAY READINGS

YOUR GUIDE FOR THE MONTH OF JUNE 2011

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OPENING PRAYER

Let us pray...Our Easter season comes to a close. Yet you, Lord, provide us with an unending reason for joy. Help us to find the “little Easters” in every Sunday celebration and the spirit of Alleluia each time we participate in the sharing of your Body and Blood. Bless too our contemplation of the story of our faith in Scripture. *Amen.*

June 5

LECTIONARY 59A / 58A

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER / ASCENSION OF THE LORD

THE BOTTOM LINE IS GOOD NEWS

FIRST READING

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES 1:12-14 /
ACTS OF THE APOSTLES 1:1-11

“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

A local pastor recently stood before his parish after proclaiming the gospel. All eyes were on him, waiting for the start of his homily. He cleared his throat. “I don’t think there’s anything I could say to improve on or add to what we just heard.” And he sat down. Some people tittered, thinking it was a joke. Then in silence, the whole community began to consider the gospel for themselves. What had their pastor found so compelling and liberating that it rendered him, uncharacteristically, speechless?

For seven weeks, we’ve been reminded in every way possible: Jesus is risen! But do we feel the impact of those words yet? Does it make a difference to what we do today, and every day? It may seem a little silly to us that the one thing the disciples choose to ask Jesus after the resurrection is this: Will our nation be back on top again soon? Yet it’s very human for us to

discover, even after extraordinary events, how quickly our thoughts return to the mundane. How do we hold onto the wonder of Easter?

» *What sort of events initiate your sense of wonder? Is it possible to **live attentive to wonder every hour?***

SECOND READING

1 PETER 4:13-16 / EPHESIANS 1:17-23

Whoever is made to suffer as a Christian should not be ashamed.

Suffering is the one universal experience human beings share around the world. No matter what our personal circumstances, we can’t do anything to shut out the anguish of our mortality. The wealthy woman who sits in an evening gown and pearls may harbor a cancer diagnosis that is as piercing to her as the loneliness of the teenager on the street is to him. One way to increase our compassion for others is to remember that there’s always one vital piece of information about the person next to us

that would arouse our sympathy for them if only we knew it. Remembering this helps to curb our tendency to play judge and jury over our sisters and brothers.

There’s a unique form of suffering that is not so common: the kind that comes not from circumstance but from the personal decision to follow Jesus. This hurt is avoidable, but we choose not to avoid it because living in the truth demands it. When we choose to do the difficult but right thing, we know we’re not alone. Many holy ones have suffered for this same cause and they stand with us.

» *Describe a time when you did the **costly right thing.** How did you grow from that experience?*

GOSPEL

JOHN 17:1-11A / MATTHEW 28:16-20

“And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”

People around the world regard U.S. citizens as unusually optimistic. A European friend of mine says, “You

always know the Americans before they speak, because they have no fear in their faces." Cheerful and fearless may not be how we describe ourselves, but compared with folks in other places, we may seem positively perky.

This fundamental can-do attitude may be why we're also described as among the most religiously committed people on the planet. We have yet to grow so cynical

about human nature that we view the mystical side of life with suspicion. We still believe in happy endings and come-from-behind wins. Just watch our movies, and consider the heroes we uphold.

This quality that I'd like to call hope is an essential element of the life of faith, too. If you don't believe in happy endings, if you've already decided that the human race can't be salvaged, it will be impossible

to embrace the gospel of Jesus. You have to believe, despite all evidence to the contrary, that the happy ending is always out there.

» *Hope is one of the three theological virtues, along with love and faith. How do you practice hope?*

June 12

LECTIONARY 63A
SOLEMNITY OF PENTECOST

THE SPIRIT MAKES US ONE

FIRST READING

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES 2:1-11

When the time of Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together.

A grade-school field trip recently marched by on the sidewalk as I walked along. It was impossible to get past this relentless river of children so I resigned myself to go with the flow and join in with them. The teachers of this brood and their aides kept a tight watch on their charges: four in a row, no dawdling, no pushing, no crossing the street until everybody was gathered together. I was in awe of the way so many little bodies could be conformed to this one smooth arc of directed human purpose. The teachers deserved a round of applause!

Rarely in life do we find everyone on the same page, united in purpose, vision, and effort. Whether we consider families, classrooms, workplaces, neighborhoods, or parishes, we're more likely to find factions aligned against each other, vying for control of the machinery that drives the whole body forward—or backward. The miracle of Pentecost is that for a single morning, everyone could talk past the barriers that normally divided them and find a way to genuine understanding.

» **What's the difference between unity and uniformity?** *Is it possible to have real communion with others and yet have differing opinions?*



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SECOND READING

1 CORINTHIANS 12:3B-7, 12-13

We were all baptized into one body, and were all given to drink of one Spirit.

It may be easy for us to read past the litany of united elements that found common cause in the Spirit and find no problem there. Jews and Greeks, slaves or free, it all sounds great when Saint Paul says it. Step back into an era when these four elements lived together

in mutual hostility, however, and we might not move past the distinctions so fast. How do people that don't share a common culture, language, values, or table befriend each other? How does a slave love a master, or a master view a slave as a brother or sister in Christ? Even men and women lived uneasily side by side in the generation of Paul. How can all of these be made "one" in any meaningful sense?

We can translate these into any of the current factions in our society to make them more immediate to our understanding: how do political opponents learn to respect each other? How do English and Spanish speakers worship together? How do Blacks and Whites develop genuine trust? How do Christians and Jews and Muslims live together in peace? This is the world into which the Spirit leads us.

» **How do you reach across the divide** *in any conversation to the one who is unlike you?*

GOSPEL

JOHN 20:19-23

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you."

When Jesus first appears to his closest friends after the resurrection, he wishes

them peace—twice. It's no accident. Peace is the last thing the disciples have had since Jesus was arrested and dragged off days earlier. How could you have peace when the last best hope of the world is tortured and killed by a bizarre alliance between your country's enemies and your own religious leaders? How do you find rest when your friend and teacher is gone and, who knows: they

could be coming after you next?

Peace has been out of the question for days. Hysteria, blame, and argument have been the spirits locked in that upper room along with the former followers of Jesus. We can imagine them tugging back and forth for control, trying to establish a new leader, direction, game plan, or escape route. And then, unexpectedly, Jesus is among them once more. He

brings peace, but he has to say it twice so that they actually hear it. Right now it's hard to hear anything over the pounding of their hearts.

» *Consider times when you've suffered turmoil, anxiety, or conflict. How do you make your way back into the presence of Jesus?*

June 19

LECTIONARY 164A

SOLEMNITY OF THE MOST HOLY TRINITY

DOING THE MATH ON THE TRINITY

FIRST READING

EXODUS 34:4B-6, 8-9

Having come down in a cloud, the LORD stood with Moses there.

Moses really does have one of the dream jobs in the Bible. He spends forty years in the close company of God: the LORD with capital letters, whose name must not be spoken because it's too holy for mortal lips to bear. Moses actually gets to talk to God on a regular basis and enjoys enough of the revealed divine presence to make his face shine impossibly bright with the reflection of God's glory.

Of course, on the down side, Moses has to muster a nation of stubborn, reluctant, and not terribly bright people for those same forty years across a wilderness and keep them from killing each other—and him. So maybe it's not such a great job after all.

What's most amazing about Moses is that his intimacy with God is so long and deep that it becomes, for him, quite normal. Wouldn't it be wonderful if you and I could say the same? So that at the end of our lives, when we behold God face to face, it will be quite like old times with a dear and familiar friend?

» *What do you do to further your friendship and intimacy with the magnificent LORD of the capital letters?*

SECOND READING

2 CORINTHIANS 13:11-13

Live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you.

I heard a retreat master once say that God isn't simply the just judge at the end of time anymore than the Lord is the great love of our lives. God is both—and a whole lot more. But whichever facet of ourselves we turn to God, that's precisely the God we get delivered back to us. Forgive, and we get the forgiving God. Show mercy, and we get mercy. Judge—and you know what Jesus said, we will be judged. Here Saint Paul adds another facet to consider: live in peace, and the God of peace will live with you.

To this end, we have to empty out all the hostility, resentment, and aggression we've built up over a lifetime of grievances. To live in peace means to harbor no jealousy, superiority, or prejudice. In place of these, we have to foster respect and tolerance of differences, a willingness to listen more than striving to be heard. Peace is never just about putting down our weapons. It's also about taking up our plowshares and creating a harvest of justice together.

» *What are the factors working against peace in your family? Community? Our nation? Among the nations?*

GOSPEL

JOHN 3:16-18

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.

Light and light and light. That's how Gregory of Nazianzus, who bears the title "Doctor of Theologians," describes the mystery of the Trinity. He also says a whole lot of other things that my little brain finds impossible to follow, but this is simple enough for me to grasp. When you turn on one light in a room, it's easily distinguished from the darkness. Turn on another light and there's a point where it's distinct from the first, and yet merges into it. Turn on a third light, and pretty soon you can't separate one patch of brightness from the others. Light becomes light becomes light and there's no boundaries between one source and another.

Understanding the Trinity is not the goal of celebrating this solemnity, however. Since the doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery, grasping it fully is off the table anyway. What we are invited to do today is rejoice that the God of faraway and beyond is also the God of intimacy and nearness. If you understand that, you know everything that you need to know about the Trinity.

» *How do you praise the God of great mysteries, and give thanks to the God who seeks your friendship?*

ARE WE PARTICIPANTS OR PASSENGERS?

FIRST READING

DEUTERONOMY 8:2-3, 14B-16A

God brought forth water from the rock, and fed you in the desert with manna.

Time and again, it's proven that people appreciate things they work for more than gifts that fall from the sky without effort. If you try to improve the lives of a defeated community by building them roads and schools, both will fall into repair after you withdraw unless the local community is engaged and shares the effort from the start. Even when bread fell from heaven and water came from a rock, it didn't change human nature or make the community around Moses particularly grateful or elicit their trust in God. They ate the bread, drank the water, and held out their hands for more.

Personal engagement trumps mere reception when it comes to taking ownership of an idea. Groups like Habitat for Humanity build houses with those who need them—and not simply for them. The micro-loan movement in Third World countries provides seed money for projects that disadvantaged people initiate themselves. The poor need partners, not parents, to assist them in climbing to new opportunities.

» **How do you respect the dignity** and freedom of those who rely on your help?

SECOND READING

1 CORINTHIANS 10:16-17

We, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

Last year, *TIME* magazine nominated Mark Zuckerberg as Person of the Year. They called him “the Connector” for launching Facebook, the world's largest social network. 600 million people use it, which amounts to one in ten people on the planet. Facebook has been described as the third largest country in the world. Like most countries, it's composed of a highly selective series of sub-communities that open their doors only to those recognized as friends based on an amalgam of often superficial similarities.

The community formed around the bread and cup of our Eucharist is a voluntary one, like those established on the Internet. But there's only one criteria to be “friended” here, and that's the belief that Christ is our life. After that, no more sub-categories are valid: gender, social status, nationality, and language are erased as meaningless distinctions of a world that is passing. What unites us in Christ is so much greater than anything that appears to keep us apart. We move outward from that unity to bring the welcome farther.

» *What are the most difficult barriers to cross in your present community?* **How does our Eucharist point the way to greater unity?**

GOSPEL

JOHN 6:51-58

“The one who feeds on me will have life because of me.”

My friend Tony is a do-er. We laughingly call him our social events coordinator, because he never simply visits. He creates whole programs of activities that the rest of us are welcome to climb aboard—or be left in the dust. Most of us climb on, happy to be passengers on Tony's train before it leaves the station.

When I imagine what it means to be a vital participant, and not just a passenger aboard someone else's train of events, I think of Tony. These distinctions are important as we approach the Eucharist. Theologian Monika Hellwig defines two common responses to the Eucharist in this way: participants and passengers. Participants eat and drink the Body and Blood of Christ to fully engage the life of Christ within us. We're not mere observers at the feast but drawn up to the table, present and invested. We're deciders here, too, making choices about whether full participation in the reality of Christ—proclaiming the kingdom, healing, journeying, suffering, dying, and rising—is really what we want. Passengers buy a ticket. Participants pay with their lives.

» *When have you been a passenger in the life of faith? a participant? What helps you to engage your faith in a more vital way?*



LET US PRAY...Lord, sometimes religion feels like a game we're playing, fooling ourselves about our intentions. But you can never be deceived, O Reader of Human Hearts. Kindle in us the passion that turns sinners into saints in every generation, so that our beliefs and our lives will become one. Through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

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