

Day by Day

Feasts, events, holidays, and thoughts for the daily preacher

Week of February 5, 2012

by Peter Scagnelli

Sunday, February 5, 2012

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Job 7:1–4, 6–7; Psalm 147; 1 Corinthians 9:16–19, 22–23;

Mark 1:29–39

- *Boundaries—again.* Last week we noted that, for Mark, Jesus is “breaker of boundaries,” e.g., ritual purity, “sacred” location, Chosen People vs. Gentiles. Indeed, at Jesus’ baptism, the boundary is broken, as the heavens are “torn open” (Mark 1:10), and God’s kingdom draws near. Last Sunday, as first sign of that kingdom’s in-breaking, Jesus broke the boundaries of Sabbath work prohibitions by “breaking” Satan’s reign over “a man with an unclean spirit” (1:23). From that spiritual healing in a sacred space, Jesus moves on today to physical healing in a “secular” space, “the house of Simon and Andrew” (1:29). The boundaries broken as this episode unfolds surely astounded the Gospel’s first hearers. Far removed from that astonishment by time and culture, let focus on those boundaries briefly: (1) It is still the Sabbath, all “work” prohibited, even this “kingdom work.” But Jesus will not be restrained! (2) Entering the room of a woman who was not “family” was something no observant Jewish man would do, certainly not a Rabbi! (3) Moreover, Jesus “grasped her hand” (1:31), i.e., Jesus *touches* a woman who (a) is not his blood relative and (b) who is ritually unclean (some taught) by reason of her illness. That this boundary-breaking is deliberate on Jesus’ part seems clear. After all, last week, when healing the man with an unclean spirit, Jesus healed with a simple spoken command, as he will two Sundays hence when healing a paralyzed man. But this week, and next week when faced with the ritual impurity of leprosy, Jesus touches the “untouchable.” As Jesus breaks these boundaries, the fever “leaves” the woman’s body, just as the unclean spirit had “come out” of the possessed man’s soul. How conscious we are of our “space,” how protective of our “turf,” personal and professional, social and institutional. Seeing Jesus break these boundaries and heal body and soul, how can we not feel compelled to reflect on our own “boundaries,” and, perhaps revise them?
- *Raised to Serve.* Jesus “helped her (Simon’s mother-in-law) up.” The Greek word (*egeiren / egerthe*) rendered here as “helped up” is translated “raised” in Mark’s account of Jesus’ resurrection (16:6). Raised by Jesus—as are we, in baptism—Simon’s mother-in-law “waited on them” (1:31). The Greek word rendered here as “waited on” (*diakonei / diakonesai*) is translated as “serve” when Jesus describes himself as one “who has come not to be served but to serve” (10:45). From this Greek derives the word *diaconate*, the ordained ministry of Word, liturgy, and charity. In a way, the diaconate models Jesus’ breaking of barriers between sacred and secular, for deacons usually minister Word and liturgy in a “sacred space,” and traditionally direct the Church’s ministry of charity “in the world.” But each of us, grasped by the hand and raised by Jesus in baptism, is called to attend to the Word, to take our part—fully, actively, consciously—in the liturgy, and serve one another, all others, in charity. And is not our service of others “ministry” to the Jesus who lives within them? Though the word is charged, rightly, with negative connotations, this service is the “slavery” of which Paul speaks, in the second reading, as having entered into freely and lovingly (1 Corinthians 9:19), not slavery bound by law, but service rendered in love. The Gospel then fast-forwards to “evening, after sunset” (Mark 1:32). Thus, not breaking the Sabbath, the crowds gather, but only “at the door” (1:33), i.e., they have not crossed the threshold of faith. They are there because of what Jesus can *do* for them, not because of who he *is* for them. But at least they’re there! This coming October, on the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of Vatican II, Pope Benedict will inaugurate a *Year of Faith*. In his Apostolic Letter, *Porta Fidei: The Door of Faith* (Acts 14:7),

announcing this, the Pope exhorts believers to invite everyone “to cross that threshold into the life of communion with God in the community of the Church.” Faithful Jews end the Sabbath with a prayer called *Havdalah*, “Separation,” marking the boundary of the Sabbath and ushering in the new work week. They celebrate God’s first creation and, chanting *Eliyahu Hanavi* (*Elijah the Prophet*), anticipate Elijah’s return to herald the Messiah’s coming to renew the whole creation. In multiple healings for those whom neighbors, family, and friends bring to him, Jesus fulfills that Sabbath prayer. How can we not think of our own baptismal call to service, to move “from Mass to Mission,” as John Paul II described it (*Dies Domini: Keeping the Lord’s Day*), to share our healing and renewing faith with family and friends, to sanctify the new week as we have sanctified Sunday?

- *Job vs. Jesus vs. Us.* On Sundays in Ordinary Time, the first reading prepares us for the Gospel: today by way of contrast. What a difference between Jesus’ peaceful balance of contemplation and activity and Job’s bleak cycle of frenetic work and troubled rest. Wakefully pondering his ceaseless trials, Job’s nights dragged on in endless anxiety. But Jesus’ pre-dawn contemplation and all-night vigils provided refreshment, renewal, intimate communion with God. Honestly, aren’t we more often like Job than like Jesus? The pre-Vatican II calendar designated this Sunday *Septuagesima*, seventy days until Easter; next week *Sexagesima*, sixty days; then *Quinquagesima*, fifty days: a three-week “countdown” so Lent could never “sneak up” on us. Over these Sundays, let us formulate our own personal “Lenten Covenant,” incorporating Lent’s three scriptural disciplines of prayer, fasting, almsgiving, as set forth in Ash Wednesday’s Gospel (Matthew 6:1–6, 16–18). Since today’s Gospel concludes with a picture of Jesus’ own perfect balance of commitment to prayer and service in charity, this Sunday could be considered a scriptural-liturgical invitation to a make Lent a season of holiness and wholeness, of reordered priorities and recaptured balance, in which a deeper relationship with God in prayer strengthens us to be, in Paul’s expression, “all things to all” our neighbors and to all others (1 Corinthians 9:22–23). As Lent draws near, what does the balance of prayer and work look like in my life? How may that have to change if Lent—and discipleship—is to bear fruit within me and in my service to others?

Monday, February 6, 2012

Memorial of Saint Paul Miki and his Companions, Martyrs (died 1597)

1 Kings 8:1–7, 9–13; Psalm 132; Mark 6:53–56

- *From Kingly Wisdom to Royal Folly:* theme of this week’s first readings. The temple’s dedication is patterned on David’s transfer of the Ark, emphasizing God’s enduring covenant with David’s house, as David’s kingly son provides “a princely house” (1 Kings 8:13) for Israel’s sovereign God. Note well: the Lord’s *glory* (8:12) fills the temple. Only in that sense does God *abide in* (8:13) the temple, for Israel’s God cannot be contained or controlled by his subjects—not even powerful royals.
- In Jesus, who heals *outside* the temple, indeed *beyond* the law’s boundaries, God *dwells in our midst*. Jesus’ healing power is neither exotic nor dramatic: simply touching his tassel suffices.
- Clergy, religious, laity; men, women; young, old; Japanese, Europeans: today’s memorial celebrates differences brought into unity by life-blood poured out in faithful witness.

Tuesday, February 7, 2012

Weekday

1 Kings 8:22–23, 27–30; Psalm 84; Mark 7:1–13

- Solomon's prayer beautifully articulates the theology of reserving sacred space exclusively for worship, even while acknowledging that God transcends every place.
- How comforting is tradition: Solomon's posture, gesture, place of prayer are familiar, and elements of his prayer resonate in our Eucharistic Prayers: praise (Preface / post-Sanctus), remembrance of God's mighty deeds (anamnesis), invocation of God's transforming power (epiclesis), intercession.
- Authentic tradition, Jesus teaches, always leads *to*, never *away from*, virtue's crown: charity. Neither legalistic riddle nor sentimental nostalgia, tradition provides community self-identity and continuity, its goal a deepening love of God manifested in practical charity.

Wednesday, February 8, 2012

Weekday

Optional Memorial of Saint Jerome Emiliani, Priest (1486–1537)

Optional Memorial of Saint Josephine Bakhita, Virgin (1868–1947)

1 Kings 10:1–10; Psalm 37; Mark 7:14–23

- Though the Queen of Sheba was impressed, Solomon's personal conduct and princely priorities were not much different from those of surrounding pagans. Yet God was gracious toward this very human king; and toward us, who, like Solomon, are too often not that much different from unbelievers.
- Yesterday Jesus asserted charity's primacy over misuse of tradition. Today, he exalts purity of heart over external ritual purity. Without *inward* integrity *outward* religious practices are meaningless, even hypocritical. A timely admonition before we embrace Lent's outward disciplines.
- Experiencing a profound conversion during wartime imprisonment, Jerome devoted himself to society's most vulnerable and died ministering to plague victims. Sudan's ongoing genocide and this Black History Month make Josephine Bakhita's memorial timely. Sold into slavery, she was brought to Italy, freed, baptized, and professed as a sister. She often kissed the baptismal font, exclaiming, "Here I became a daughter of God!" A wonderful thought as the Lenten season of initiation and baptismal renewal approaches.

Thursday, February 9, 2012

Weekday

1 Kings 11:4–13; Psalm 106; Mark 7:24–30

- Solomon's foreign wives and covenant infidelities should prompt us to examine our own affections and attractions, contradictions and compromises.
- Earlier, Mark asserted that Jesus "could work no miracle because of their lack of faith" (Mark 6:5), referring to the devout worshipers in his hometown synagogue. Today, faced with a Gentile woman's undaunted faith, Jesus cannot refuse.
- Who are our "Gentiles," victims of our prejudice, exclusion, scorn? Are we as gracious as Jesus finally was?

Friday, February 10, 2012

Memorial of Saint Scholastica, Virgin (480–547)

1 Kings 11:29–32; 12:19; Psalm 81; Mark 7:31–37

- Prophetic ritual effects what it symbolizes: a cloak torn into twelve pieces sends ten tribes to Jeroboam's rebellion. One tribe stays with Solomon. That leaves an extra tribe unaccounted for, representing the hope that God's punishments will be less than precise!
- Is Jesus' reluctance to heal the Gentile woman, and his seeming difficulty healing today, Mark's way of showing Jesus' dismay at diminishing faith? Jesus' detailed gestures evoke the rites of Christian initiation. Does our community have catechumens? If not, why not? Are we living invitations to faith, witnesses to Jesus' compassion?
- Scholastica witnesses to women's presence, from the beginning, in establishing the monastic tradition of "prayer and work," a tradition that reminds us: our "ordinary" lives are filled with God's presence.

Saturday, February 11, 2012

Weekday

Optional Memorial of Our Lady of Lourdes (apparition, 1858)

1 Kings 12:26–32; 13:33–34; Psalm 106; Mark 8:1–10

World Day of the Sick

- By corrupting Israel's liturgy, Jeroboam subverts Israel's faith. Catholic theology expresses this dynamic relationship as *lex orandi, lex credendi*; some add, *lex vivendi*: how we worship God powerfully influences, for better or worse, the faith of those participating and how they live that faith in daily life.
- A Gentile woman's faith was sure of crumbs from the table. But Jesus' disciples seem clueless. Could Mark be saying, again, that hardened hearts diminish the full scope of Jesus' power? This time, fewer people are fed, fewer baskets left over. Still, in Jesus' hands, our meager provisions go a long way. But what about *our* worship, *our* faith, *our* generosity?
- In 1992, Blessed John Paul II designated today World Day of the Sick, recalling miracles of physical and spiritual healing at Lourdes, proposing Mary at the foot of the Cross as a living icon of suffering's redemptive power when united to Christ's sacrifice. Within a few years, Parkinson's transformed the Pope, too, into a living icon of redemptive suffering.

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