

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

April 7, 2019 C

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 mercy, this week we listen to readings that powerfully speak to us of your mercy and, at the same time, call us to turn away from sin. Help us to make this message our own. Help us to always remember that while you hate and condemn sin, you always love the sinner. 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: The Gospel story is one of the most dramatic in the New Testament: one man standing against a crowd surrounding a woman they want to stone. The Gospel is also a fulfillment of the "new thing" that Isaiah speaks about in the first reading: God is doing a new thing for the exiles, showing them mercy and love. Paul is also a recipient of God's mercy.

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 46:16-21

Today's first reading is from what is called in Isaiah the *Book of Consolation* (chs 40-55). These chapters were written to encourage the Israelites while they were living in exile in Babylon and in danger of losing hope in God's love for them. With imagery that harkens back to the Exodus story, as well as the creation story of Genesis, the author exhorts his fellow Jews to trust that God will have mercy on them and come to their aid. The prophet assures them that God is about to do a "new thing" for them. They will experience a new Exodus. The mighty God who created the world and freed their ancestors from Egypt is about to perform another mighty saving event on their behalf.

PSALM 126

These verses reflect the exiles' joy after their liberation from captivity.

SECOND READING: Philippians 3:8-14

When Paul encounters Christ on the road to Damascus, he becomes the recipient of God's mercy and unconditional love. In today's verses, Paul shares with us what this new life in Christ means to him. "*I consider everything as loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus.*" His new life is a total gift. Prior to his Damascus experience (Acts 9), Paul believed himself to be a "self-made" man who saved himself by his observance of the law. Now he has a totally new

mindset. He knows that all that he is, is a total gift from God. He is a "graced sinner." The imprisoned Paul says that his present sufferings are a way for him to conform himself a little more to his Savior who suffered so much for him.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: John 8:1-11

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.

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

GOSPEL: John 8:1-11

While this story appears to be an honest attempt by some of the scribes and Pharisees to pursue justice, it is really another trap set by Jesus' enemies. If Jesus let them throw stones at the woman, his reputation as one who spoke very eloquently of God's mercy would have been severely damaged. On the other hand, if Jesus told them to let her go, his credibility as a Rabbi would be at stake. Jesus' opponents must have felt very secure about their trap.

But Jesus outsmarts them by turning the focus on *them* and *their* sins. “*Let the one among you without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.*” Then Jesus writes on the ground. Some have suggested that he wrote the sins of the accusers. “*They went away, one by one, beginning with the elders.*” Jesus turns the tables on the accusers, and they become the accused. They came to Jesus only aware of the *woman’s* sins; they go away aware of *their own* sins. As in last week’s Gospel, Jesus seeks to get the Pharisees to become aware of their own sin and their need for repentance.

Finally, Jesus is left with the woman. Commenting on this story, St. Augustine says, “*Only two are left: misery and mercy.*” Jesus communicates to the shame-filled woman God’s mercy and unconditional love. She experiences the “new thing” (God’s mercy and love) which Isaiah spoke about in the first reading. Jesus upholds the Mosaic Law by telling the woman to “*go and sin no more.*” Jesus condemns the sin, pardons the sinner, and calls her to repentance. He also calls the woman’s accusers to conversion. They are called to let go of their sin of condemnation of the woman.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Turn to the person next to you and share what word/words or images in the readings caught your attention? Did they comfort or challenge you or touch you in some other way?

The facilitator can decide which is more helpful: to share the next questions with the whole group, or to share in smaller groups of three or four.

2. Isaiah tells us in the first reading to “*remember not the events of the past.*” In the second reading, Paul tells us that “*he gives no thought to what lies behind.*” What has helped or could help you to let go of painful memories or some past serious sin?

3. What is the darkness or sin in *us* that gives us satisfaction in pointing out the sins of *others*?

4. Is it easy or hard for you to condemn the sin but not the sinner? Or do you tend to condemn sin *and* sinner?

5. Our daily call is to *speak* and *act* like disciples of Jesus. What is today’s Gospel asking of us disciples?

JOURNALING: *Having listened to God’s Word and to others’ reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what God is saying 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.*

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Turn to the person next to you and name one way you can put into practice the message(s) of the readings. Suggestions: *Pray for the grace to let go of some bad thing in your past if you tend to hang on to a bad memory. Pray for the grace to see what “new thing” God may now be doing in your life.* If you have a tendency to judge others and name their sins, try to focus on your own sins and seek the grace of true repentance for them.

SHARED PRAYER ON THE READINGS

FACILITATOR: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestions:

✠ *Jesus, help me to always remember that your mercy is always greater than my greatest sin.*

✠ *Jesus, help me to live your message of mercy by my willingness to show mercy to all who have judged me.*

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

FACILITATOR: Let us now conclude with prayers of thanksgiving, petition and intercession. 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.

Note to facilitator:

The Gospel for next Sunday, Palm Sunday, will be the long passion story. As a group, you can decide if you want the participants to read the passion story *prior* to the meeting or *during* your gathering.

Likewise, since the *commentary* on Luke’s passion is long, you may need to decide if you wish to read it before your next meeting.

Perhaps, you may decide to read the 12 bullet points on the characteristics of Luke’s passion.