

A Journey of Healing and Reconciliation Through Restorative Justice



2018 Lenten Reflections

Catholic Mobilizing Network

Education for Justice, a project of Center of Concern



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction to 2018 Lenten Reflections	3
About the Authors	4
Background and Key Foundational Resources for CMN'S Ministry	5
Ash Wednesday	6 - 10
First Sunday of Lent	11 - 17
Second Sunday of Lent	18 - 22
Third Sunday of Lent	23 - 26
Fourth Sunday of Lent	27 - 31
Fifth Sunday of Lent	32 - 36
Solemnity of St. Joseph	37 - 40
Palm Sunday	41 - 45
Holy Thursday	46 - 49
Good Friday	50 - 53
Easter Sunday	54 - 59



INTRODUCTION TO 2018 LENTEN REFLECTIONS

Catholic Mobilizing Network (CMN) is the national Catholic organization working to end the death penalty and promote restorative justice. CMN is the only explicitly faith-based organization intimately involved in the movement to end capital punishment. Through education, advocacy, and prayer, CMN asserts the Catholic Church's pro-life stance against the death penalty, mobilizes Catholics and people of faith and conscience to take action at the grassroots levels, and amplifies a message of mercy and justice in Catholic and secular media outlets.

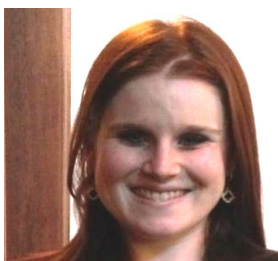
CMN is delighted to share *Education for Justice's* 2018 Lenten Reflections. This year's reflections were developed by a team of writers—all on the board and staff of CMN—giving the reflections broader and deeper contours than a single voice. The consistent backdrop to the writing is that the authors share a common mission to seek an end to the death penalty and to promote restorative justice. Some reflections offer a narrative tone, as if the writer shared an intimate and personal story with you. Several of these stories have never been committed to paper before now. Other reflections call on one's theological appetite and depth. In addition, CMN is pleased to share a special reflection on the Solemnity of St. Joseph through the wisdom of a religious sister and CMN board member who is a member of the Congregation of St. Joseph, which has the gift of a dedicated charism to St. Joseph.

Each reflection provides a window into God's immense wisdom, the social teaching of the Church, how one's life can be touched by God, and how we are invited to walk in faith in bold, but ordinary ways.

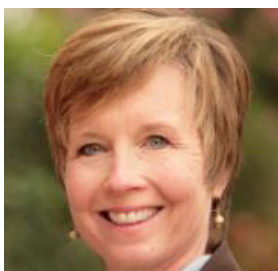
*All biblical references are found in the *New American Bible*, Revised Edition (NABRE).



About the Authors



Alexandra Carroll, M.T.S., is CMN's Director of Communications and has a Masters in Theological Studies (M.T.S.) from Boston College. While living and studying in Boston, Massachusetts, Alexandra became a weekly volunteer with the Catholic prison ministry at the Suffolk County House of Corrections. Her encounters with the women and men she met while volunteering inspired her to get involved with work to end the use of the death penalty.



Karen Clifton, M.Div., CMN's Executive Director and began her work against the death penalty in 1996 in Houston, Texas, when her social justice and advocacy projects intersected with those of Sr. Helen Prejean, C.S.J. In 2008, Karen spearheaded the formation of CMN. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., CMN seeks to apply the Church's teaching on the dignity of human person in the areas of capital punishment and restorative justice.



Caitlin Morneau is CMN's Director of Restorative Justice and is currently an M.A. candidate in Conflict Transformation at Eastern Mennonite University. Caitlin serves on the Board of Directors at Bethlehem Farm in Alderson, West Virginia. She served as an AmeriCorps Caseworker with Catholic Charities of Baltimore. She previously worked in various administrative and programmatic roles at faith-based non-profits to advance social justice and community engagement.



Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, M.T.S., is CMN's Managing Director. Krisanne is co-author of *Advocating for Justice: An Evangelical Vision for Transforming Systems and Structures* (Baker Books, 2016), and is also an adjunct professor at Eastern University's Graduate School of Leadership and Development in St. David's, Pennsylvania.



Marianne Race, C.S.J., is a member of CMN's sponsor, the Congregation of St. Joseph. Her ministry has consistently been in education, beginning with elementary and high school and currently in Adult Spiritual Education. She is the author of *In This Place: Reflections on the Land of the Gospels for the Liturgical Cycle* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008) and is a contributor to



Background and Key Foundational Resources for Catholic Mobilizing Network's Ministry:

In 2008, a collection of activists, murder victims's family members, representatives from prominent Catholic organizations, and women religious—including Sr. Helen Prejean, C.S.J., (author of *Dead Man Walking*)—came together to brainstorm how to support the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops's (USCCB) Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty. In January 2009, CMN was formally founded to seek an end to the death penalty and to promote restorative justice. CMN continues to work closely with the USCCB and is an independent, sponsored ministry of the Congregation of St. Joseph.

- ***Catholics and the Death Penalty Video***

This 4:30 minute video introduces audiences to the impacts of capital punishment on the real life stories of those intimately involved. Viewers will hear firsthand from murder victims's family members, former prison wardens, and legal and elected officials who have all come to oppose the death penalty. This video serves as a foundational resources for Catholic Mobilizing Network's work to abolish the death penalty and promote restorative justice: <http://bit.ly/2r1rRH5>.

- ***Where Justice and Mercy Meet: Catholic Opposition to the Death Penalty***

The book explores the Catholic stance against capital punishment in new and important ways through a number of essays by faculty from Mount Saint Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Maryland. *Where Justice and Mercy Meet* offers new insight into the debates about capital punishment; provides revealing, and sometimes surprising, information about methods of execution; and explores national and international trends and movements related to the death penalty: <http://bit.ly/CMNDPBook>.

- ***Redemption & Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Restorative Justice***

The book develops the traditional Catholic understanding of justice, offers a theological understanding of restorative justice, explains how it can be implemented, and reflects on the practical arguments for restorative justice. Grounded in the stories of real people, *Redemption and Restoration* helps readers gain a deeper understanding of how this affects us all as a country and a church. It includes discussion questions to engage groups in exploring issues related to restorative justice: <http://bit.ly/CMNRJBook>.

May this Lent be a time of abundant grace, clarity, and interior peace. Thank you for allowing us to walk with you on your faith journey.

Blessings,
Alexandra, Caitlin, Karen, Krisanne, and Sister Marianne



Ash Wednesday is the beginning of the journey of Lent in preparation for Easter. In our Catholic tradition, we fast, pray, and give alms during this time in the liturgical year. The Church sets aside time for us to “go into your inner room, close the door and pray to your Father in secret” (Matthew 6:16). It is a time to look inward and recognize our own personal sufferings. It is also a time to look outward with a listening heart to all those around us—especially people who are marginalized, denied basic human dignity, and rendered voiceless by society.

Lent calls us out of our busyness to take time to hear God’s desire to be close to us and to be our compass in life. It is a time to experience God’s nurturing love and mercy. When we experience God’s love, it plants the seed of desire to follow him. This time will also allow us to walk with God and to absorb his concern for the suffering of others.

Lent can be a time for communal solidarity. The call to “fasting and weeping, and mourning” (Joel 2:12) is a shared call for all of us. We have all felt the pain of loss or suffered with our loved ones as they have suffered. Our faith is based on God’s love for us all and it calls us to look around and see others in our community and world as our brothers and sisters.

Ash Wednesday

February 14, 2018

+ + +

“A clean heart create
for me, O God,
and a steadfast spirit
renew within me.”

– Psalms 51:12-13

+ + +

First Reading

Joel 2:1-18

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 51:3-6, 12-14, and 17

Second Reading

2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2

Gospel

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18



“Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31). Common threads of brokenness and light connect us with others. We are called to live our lives in solidarity, held in common by our God, walking on our life journey.

The reality is that we live in a divided world of the haves and have nots. The chasm between the two is wide. Suffering surrounds us but it is possible to live a life that never really sees any suffering. Economically segregated schools, gated communities, limited and restricted public transportation routes to keep out the “undesirables” prevent us from having conversations or looking in the eyes of someone who is not “like” us. Living in a divided world prevents us from seeing the brokenness or suffering in another which can conveniently impede our recognition of the brokenness within ourselves. Furthermore, our divided communities stop us from recognizing the spark of God uniquely found in the “other.”



Photo Credit: Scott Langley

What do we gain from our own suffering or by suffering in solidarity with our neighbors?

I learned the hidden gift of suffering from the women in the dump in Juárez, Mexico. On a trip intended to be an experience of solidarity, I traveled with a group to a moonscape of hills of ground grey trash remains. Families without resources had built squatters of cinder block houses in this area. The windowless houses had sliced, open wires looping from house to house from an electrical pole which served as a source of pirated power. This wire powered a single bulb which provided limited light for each house. They carried water by buckets from the local source of water and there were communal outhouses between multiple houses. The family that hosted me cooked from a kerosene stove.

As the guest, I was given the chicken wing, the source of flavor for the large pot of water. I was also given the one bed for the whole family of five. It was January and winter. I was fully clothed and had on a coat, but was still cold. I watched the children run around barefoot in their year-round lightweight cotton clothes, adding to my discomfort. I was strictly warned not to give them anything but gratitude during my visit. It was their gift to be able to show me their lives and host me.



We met each morning for prayer at a center run by a couple of Dominican Sisters. If the women from “*el dumpe*” showed up for the service run by a traveling deacon, they were given a number, which allowed them to stand in line to buy food for their family. After the prayer service, we walked to a simple constructed square wooden building. I was not allowed to enter. I watched from the doorway as people placed a couple of items in each bag without giving anyone a choice of the items they were to purchase.



The Dominican Sisters center also served as a place for the children to gather, to subsidize the public schooling which was only half a day and only up to sixth grade. The women would gather at the center to assist in preparation before their children were brought back to the dump on a school bus. The sisters would gather with the women and read to them from the scriptures and then break them up into groups to discuss what they heard.

On the second day of following this schedule, we arrived at the center and I noticed one woman's face was swollen—black and blue on one side. I noticed how the other women did not say a word, but one by one came up and touched her shoulder or held her hand in silence while they silently prayed over her.

While we were gathering, a person came to the door and whispered a message to one of the women, who in turn whispered it to another and it spread throughout the room. Several of the women went outside. I overheard one of them. The message was that another child had been found in the dump, with his organs harvested. The women went to ensure that their children came straight from the bus to the center.

While I was still trying to absorb this reality, the sisters gathered the women to listen to the scriptures. The readings spoke of the suffering of the world. Inside my head I was screaming: “Don't talk to them about suffering. It is all around them!” I thought, “My sisters need words of hope, comfort, and love.”



We broke into small groups and the woman with the swollen face looked at me and said, “I can’t imagine not having suffering to remind me to depend on God. If I did not have suffering, I would probably think I could do anything and everything myself.” She had a look on her face that was a mixture of thinking about something unimaginable and simultaneously horrible.

As a privileged person from the Global North, I was hit with the power of her message. It felt like a full body slam. I immediately felt like I was in the presence of someone who had personally met and knew Jesus. These were his disciples.

As we prepared to leave another set of whispering went through the room. One of the women shyly asked if before we left they could bless us as they do their children each time they leave them. They did not know if they would see us again and they wanted us to go with God. For me, that blessing ranked higher than any blessing by a Pope. Even Pope Francis! What a gift.¹

Prayer comes deep from the heart, not the lips. These women had a true understanding of the meaning of St. Augustine’s words, “My soul is restless until it rests in you, O God.” They knew the love of God and had the desire to stay grounded in that love.

Lent is the time for us to remember that our faith is grounded in a deep desire for love. The fact that we have a desire to be closer to God means that we have been given a taste of God. In remembering that we each are loved by God, we must also remember we are all first loved by God. If we allow ourselves to be moved by the suffering of others it will enrich our relationship with God which will overflow into us and allow us to be God’s presence to others. Through being present to those who are suffering or by working to alleviate the suffering of others we are called out of ourselves and transformed. “Rend your hearts, not your garments”(Joel 2:12).

It is through this opportunity, by the ministry of presence, we are able to experience God on this earth through others. Their stories teach us to become more forgiving of others and to recognize where we are in need of forgiveness. It is in community that we recognize God in the other and we are moved toward wholeness and healing.

Let us all learn from the women: “If I did not have suffering, I would probably think I could do anything and everything myself.” Take the time to listen to your desire to grow closer to God. Look around and see God in all, including (especially) those who are suffering and through solidarity, allow your brokenness to be transformed.

¹ Karen Clifton, “Personal Story of an Experience in Juárez, Mexico,” September 2017.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What suffering do you witness around you? How can you hold this in prayer throughout Lent?
- What have you learned from suffering? How has God spoken to you in your suffering?
- Where have you experienced solidarity in your life? What did that look like and feel like?

FAITH IN ACTION

- When we commit ourselves to pray during Lent, we open ourselves to the opportunity of hearing God speak to us in our hearts.
- When we commit ourselves to fast during Lent, as a practice of solidarity with those on the margins. When you experience hunger in fasting, let it be a reminder of those who go without food or sustenance each day and remain in constant reliance on God.
- When we commit ourselves to give alms during Lent, we enable others to access basic needs and benefits in life.

PRAYER

Loving God, we are grateful for the gift of this day and all of our many blessings you have so bountifully bestowed upon on.

As we begin this journey of Lent, give us the desire to go into our 'inner room' and to spend time deepening our relationship with you.

Give us the gift of listening. Help us hear your voice when you speak to us in our hearts and when you speak through those around us.

Help us to see your presence in the face of the poor, the poor in spirit, the marginalized, the condemned, and each person you place in our paths.

Through the lens of gratitude, help us to share our gifts of time, talent, and treasure with those in need.

Keep us ever dependent on you and grounded in your love and mercy. Amen.





— Reflection by Caitlin Morneau

On this first Sunday of Lent, we are reminded of our call to right relationship. God's covenant with all humanity compels us to maintain a sense of justice that is much more relational than how society understands justice. Even in the face of grave harm, we are obliged to remember our covenant promises and focus on a restoration of relationships that will enable the coming of God's Kingdom.

This call to restoration, to maintain and approach justice as God understands it, is something the members of Temple B'nai in Des Moines, Iowa, know all too well:

"In March, 1994, the members of Temple B'nai Jeshurun of Des Moines, Iowa, awoke to find neo-Nazi graffiti and swastikas scrawled on their synagogue." The vandals—a nineteen-year-old man and his seventeen year-old girlfriend—were apprehended and charged with hate crime. He was troubled, and she was tagging along. A few years before, he had run away from home and found a place among members of the Aryan nation. When he returned to Des Moines, he hoped "to become the leader of the disparate groups of neo-Nazis in the area. The desecration of the Temple was

First Sunday of Lent

February 18, 2018

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"Good and upright
is the LORD, he guides
the humble to justice,
and he teaches
the humble his way."

– Psalm 25:8-9

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First Reading

Genesis 9:8-15

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 25:4-9

Second Reading

1 Peter 3:18-22

Gospel

Mark 1:12-15



his first public 'action' against the enemy." She was under his tutelage. The people of Des Moines were outraged and called for retribution. With the prompting of Rabbi Steven Fink and the temple leadership, the congregation of Temple B'nai Jeshurun put the matter to debate. Some argued that the full weight of the criminal justice system should be set against the offenders. "Others argued that simply putting these individuals in jail would only create true hard-core neo-Nazis, or victims of another sort."



Photo Credit: Scott Langley

The two accused pleaded guilty, but the sentencing hearing was postponed so that a prearranged meeting could be held with the defendants and the temple membership. During a four-hour "facilitated session," the community "explain[ed] to them the damage done by their act of hate-vandalism" and set about "to work out a sentence." After much discussion, the members of the synagogue came to a consensus, and the offenders accepted their solution: 100 hours of service to the synagogue under the supervision of the Temple's custodian; 100 hours of study of Judaism and Jewish history with the Rabbi; a referral to a hearing specialist for the young man [he had a hearing disability]; a requirement that the young man remove the Nazi tattoos on his arms; and attainment of employment skills and psychological assessment of both the offenders as well as fulfillment of requirements for a GED. After successful completion, the charges against them would be dismissed. In the end, the two offenders did attain high school diplomas, were married, and started a family. In the process, they "learned about Jewish history and culture, including the Holocaust, had individual needs met, and took responsibility for their actions."²

Without question, grave harm was caused to the Temple B'nai Jeshurun and its members. But those involved in the processes had the wisdom to see that there were significant questions and inequity at hand that had influenced the actions of these individuals. Through the encounter, the community realized the unaddressed needs of the perpetrators for belonging, stability, education, physical, and mental health issues among others for which they sought fulfillment in hateful actions. Likewise, the perpetrators came to recognize the depth of the harm they had

² Richard Buck, "Scripture - Old Testament," *Redemption and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Restorative Justice*, ed Trudy D. Conway, David Matzko McCarthy, and Vicki Schieber (Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 2017), 87-88.

caused and expressed their remorse. The Jewish community's restorative process addressed the immediate impacts of the harm created, allowed the community to find healing in their ability to voice the ways they had been harmed, and was consistent with biblical justice and covenant relationship.

In the document *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, the U.S. Bishops describe Biblical justice as "more comprehensive than subsequent



philosophical definitions [of justice]. It is not concerned with a strict definition of rights and duties, but with the rightness of the human condition before God and within society. Nor is justice opposed to love; rather, it is both a manifestation of love and a condition for love to grow...The quest for justice arises from loving gratitude for the saving acts of God and manifests itself in wholehearted love of God and neighbor."³

We see this understanding of justice embodied in the notion of covenant relationship. In covenant relationship, we honor a commitment to the other that bears an increased level of responsibility. As Catholics, we understand marriage as a covenant, in that it is more than a legally binding status. It is a set of promises that holds us to a higher standard of commitment, and accountability to one another. In marriage, we seek to ensure the sainthood of our spouse and aspire to be the best person we can possibly be in light of this call. Those who have been married for years know that sometimes we are better at carrying out these commitments than other times. When we fall short of these commitments, in large or small ways, we cause damage or harm to that relationship.

But marriage is not the only place that we are invited into such covenantal or right relationship. In the first reading, God creates an example by establishing his covenant with the earth and all who dwell in it (Genesis 9:8-15). And so, we are called to bring this standard of relationship to friends and family, as well as co-workers, acquaintances and all whom we encounter. But what does it mean to be in covenantal relationship with strangers? Institutions? The earth? Enemies?

³ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Publishing, 1986), sec 39.

As Martin Luther King Jr., preached, “Now there is a final reason I think that Jesus says, ‘Love your enemies.’ It is this: that love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals. Just keep being friendly to that person. Just keep loving them, and they can’t stand it too long. Oh, they react in many ways in the beginning. They react with guilt feelings, and sometimes they’ll hate you a little more at that transition period, but just keep loving them. And by the power of your love they will break down under the load. That’s love, you see. It is redemptive, and this is why Jesus says love. There’s something about love that builds up and is creative. There is something about hate that tears down and is destructive. So love your enemies.”⁴

By this standard, should we not radically love even those with whom we feel estranged, disconnected, or angry? Should we not seek to transform their hearts and minds also to draw them nearer to sainthood? In the same right, we must each have the ability to recognize when it is our own hearts that need to be transformed.

Of course, such transformation is not easy. It must begin with authentic accountability and ownership of wrongs done to others. Often, this can only be realized through encounter with those who have been impacted by the harmful actions themselves. It is one thing to see or read about the positions that someone takes on an issue, it is another to hear the stories that brought them to that place and the needs at the heart of their motivations. Sometimes we find that our basic needs for belonging, sustenance, or safety at the heart of our differing actions or stances are not so different after all. In the process, we recognize our own faults, our failings, and ways in which

“Just as God made
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so too, we are
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Our understanding
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the promises
made with,
and by God.”

⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., “Loving Your Enemies,” Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, November 17, 1957, <http://stanford.io/2fCXFuF>.

“... let us remember our call to right relationships,
to be open to transformation, and to live in a way
as though the Kingdom of God is at hand.”

they hurt others. Here, we recognize repentance as a necessary part of transformation. For it is only in this honesty and humility that we can set out, together, in building God’s Kingdom of love and compassion (Mark 1:12-15). On that long and difficult journey, we look to God to teach us the ways to truth and life in keeping with God’s covenant.

In the second reading we are reminded of the ways that Christ recognized how humanity’s relationship with him had been broken by sin. Jesus’s suffering and death was the ultimate sacrifice of repair that calls us all to follow this way of life (1 Peter 3:18-22). The biblical understanding of justice compels us to constantly imitate God’s covenant relationship with us—valuing love and the rightness of the human condition above all else. The human condition is comprised of many facets—physical, material, emotional, spiritual, etc. Restorative practices like the process described in the community of Des Moines, seek to address this wholeness



of humanity for all who are impacted by harm. In the case, of Temple B’nai Jeshurun this meant cleaning up the graffiti, learning about the history and persecution of the Jewish people, and pursuing education and treatment that would allow the perpetrators to become productive, loving members of society. In our personal lives, this might take the form of apologizing to someone who we have hurt and asking what can be done to “make it right,” or engaging in dialogue with someone who hurt us, even if remaining silent would seem easier. Then in the difficult moments we pray, “Your ways, O LORD, make known to me; teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my savior” (Psalm 25:5).

Just as God made a covenant with Noah, so too, we are all brought into relationship with God, and one another. Our understanding and approach to justice, then, must shift so as to fulfill the promises made with and by God. During this first week of Lent, let us remember our call to right relationships, to be open to transformation, and to live in a way as though the Kingdom of God is at hand.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Faith communities, town or city leaders, or even family members will face conflict from time to time. Often, the conflict arises from disagreements about how to meet and achieve similar goals. We are all working to live out the mission of the Kingdom of God. We must remember our call to covenant with each other. In times of conflict, how can we create spaces to hear the stories (the heart) of those with whom we disagree?
- During Lent, we live with anticipation of the time of fulfillment of the kingdom. What is necessary for each of us to prepare our hearts and lives to be an Easter people?
- Think of a relationship in your life that is in need of repair. What harm caused that brokenness? What could be done to make it right again?

FAITH IN ACTION

- In our adversarial society, to live restoratively is to go against the grain. Sometimes we need reminders to hold ourselves accountable in our actions. God set a rainbow in the sky as a reminder of the covenant he has made with us. Consider a tangible or visual reminder of covenantal or right relationship that you can create for yourself.
- There are many ways in which parishes and faith communities experience harm and conflict and many restorative ways to respond. But in order to do so, it is important to be familiar with the principles and practices of restorative justice. Catholic Mobilizing Network has created materials for small groups within parishes to learn about and engage restorative practices in their own lives and communities. Visit CMN's Restorative Justice page: <http://bit.ly/2y3uru6>, to learn more.
- Dorothy Day said, "The greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us." Lent is a time of contemplating death and rebirth. What is an aspect of your life that is keeping you from a closer relationship with God? How can you let it "die away" in order to create the space for new life?



PRAYER

Dear Lord, walk with us
As we enter this season of Lent.

Help us to recognize the gift of healing
And wholeness in being in right relationships
With all of our brothers and sisters.

Give us the grace and strength
To be open to listening to our perpetrators
And to placing ourselves in the shoes of others.

Keep our eyes focused on the goal
Of all being healed, restored,
And in right relationship with others.

During this journey of Lent, gently remind us
Of times we have harmed others.

Give us the courage and opportunity
To reach out and ask for forgiveness.

Move us to work to restore
Our broken relationships to wholeness.

Give us listening ears for ways we can work
To restore our communities.

Make us aware of broken systems and ways
That we contribute to systemic violence.

Show us how to create restorative practices
Which will contribute to restorative systems
And justice in our families, communities, and in our country.

We offer all of these prayers
In the name of your Son, the Prince of Peace. Amen.





— Reflection by Alexandra Carroll, M.T.S.

The aftermath of a traumatic event is difficult. Questions surround about what has happened, why it happened, and what to do next. Perhaps one of the more challenging questions involves our understanding of where God is in our suffering. Why did God allow this to happen? What did I do to deserve this? How do I maintain faith and hope in God amidst my pain? This week's readings call us to revisit these questions, and to dig deeper at God's call to find healing and reconciliation after suffering.

A colleague offered this reflection on her own experience of discovering God's grace within suffering:

"I personally experienced questioning the 'Why, God?' question after losing my parents as a result of a head-on car collision caused by a 17 year-old in a pick-up truck. My parents had risen early on a Sunday morning to go to Mass. Before they left the neighborhood the driver swung into their lane going 45 miles an hour and hit them head on. My mother died within hours of unstoppable internal bleeding. My father died after a year of trying to recover from breaking almost every bone in his body.

We were given the opportunity to make a statement at the trial for involuntary manslaughter.

Second Sunday of Lent

February 25, 2018

+ + +

**"Who will bring a charge
against God's chosen ones?
It is God who acquits us,
who will condemn?"**

– Romans 8:33-34

+ + +

First Reading

Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18

Responsorial Psalm

Psalms 116:10, 15-19

Second Reading

Romans 8:31-34

Gospel

Mark 9:2-10



Our initial response was to write a lament about how we had been robbed of two active, vivacious people who touched so many lives. With the grace of God, we wrote about how we wanted this person to be aware of the loss, but we wanted them to go on and do good things in life. To live and do good works, since our parents were with us no longer, they could carry their loving spirits forward.

A couple of years later, my sister moved into a new neighborhood. A man came forward and introduced himself. He had the same unusual last name as the person who had been involved in my parents accident. She mentioned she knew one other person with that name and named them. He replied, "I am their uncle." She went on to tell him that her parents had been in the accident.



He leaned forward and said, "As a family we have always worried that something bad would come of the trajectory of this young person's life. After the accident and now in college, they are doing great things. It turns out this young person is a great artist and is doing amazing work." As a family, this message was the gift we needed to be healed. A new life came out of a loss. This was not our plan, but was God's grace in a bad situation."⁵

Abraham and Isaac encounter a similar intervention of God's healing grace in their experience on top of the Mountain (Genesis 22:2). This passage has often been understood as God "testing" Abraham. However, if we look at this passage in the context of the radical and profound promises of God, the meaning shifts. If we view this story as one about the relationship between Father and son, offender and victim, it becomes clear that God is calling the Israelites to a new way of life. Commanding Abraham to forfeit the sometimes common practice of child sacrifice and violence, God proposes a new understanding of blessing and promise (Genesis 22:17-18).

⁵ Karen Clifton, e-mail message to author, September 15, 2017.

God removed the need for sacrifice from us with the gift of His own Son (Romans 8:32). No longer are we doomed to violence and anguish, for God has felt our pain and given us a way to stop the cycle of violence. Jesus has shown us the way to true fulfillment of the promises of God, given in the very first call to reconciliation between Isaac and Abraham. Unlike Moses and Elijah before him, Jesus will be the one to fulfill the promises God made with the Israelites (Mark 9:7). The instance upon secrecy of this prophecy stresses just how revolutionary the Messiah will be (Mark 9:9-10). Departing from the many who have come before him, Jesus's reign will be marked not by conquest but by nonviolence and merciful grace.

Jesus has come to stop the previous cycle. Just as Yahweh acted to stop the cycle of sacrifice, so too, Jesus has been sent to stop the cycle of violence and conquest, seen with those who have come before him. Predicting his death and resurrection in secret, Jesus knows the cycle of violence will be disrupted (Mark 9:9). Jesus has re-de-

defined the promises of Yahweh as understood in the Old Testament. His sacrifice on the cross is to act as an impetus for all of us to stop responding to painful experiences of harm with vengeance, but to open our hearts to mercy, to allow our new life with God to take hold.

Abraham and Isaac may have never been able to truly heal the harm caused by that day on the mountain. Abraham and Sarah likely had their relationship forever altered by the activities of that day. Yet, in that same event, the power and importance of forgiveness and reconciliation can be seen. One may always wonder why an event of suffering has occurred—we will always ask ourselves why Yahweh allowed Isaac to experience such a trauma. In light of today's readings, however, we are called to ask different questions: How is God calling me toward restoration and reconciliation? Where can I work to stop the cycle of violence in my life, community, and world?



Mother-and-son artists, Esther and Michael Augsburgers created "Guns Into Plowshares" as a message of nonviolence. Created during the District's murderous 1990s, the four-ton, 16-foot-high sculpture is the blade of a massive plow encrusted with thousands of actual guns taken off city streets during a no-questions-asked gun-buyback program funded in 1994. (Photo Credit: Eastern Mennonite University)

“The opportunity to give testimony of my family’s loss was an important part of our healing process because it allowed both the young person and those making decisions about the associated sentence to hear and know the impact of this tragic collision in a real way, but also to hear our wishes as the victims. In a similar way, knowing that this young person’s life had been transformed for the better helped us to know that the plea for rehabilitation was worthwhile. Each of these, along with other sources of support, helped to break potential cycles of violence in our own lives so that we could move forward, rather than allowing our grief to manifest in ways that caused further harm to ourselves or others.”⁶

As we continue to journey through Lent, our call away from violence toward peace and mercy becomes much clearer. This week, we are shown the beauty and love God has for us. We are invited to discover the grace of God present among us within acts of harm and restoration.

⁶Ibid.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Parker Palmer, a Quaker elder, educator, activist, and founder of the Center for Courage & Renewal says, “Violence is what happens when we don’t know what else to do with our suffering.” Can you think of an instance when an experience of suffering has led you to act in a way that causes further harm to themselves or others? What change might have broken this cycle?
- The sculpture, “Guns Into Plowshares,” (<http://wapo.st/2yG01SZ>) was created as a result of literally removing weapons from the streets through a city-wide buy-back program in Washington, D.C. Now, it stands as a memorial of lives lost and messenger of nonviolence. What weapons do we have stored in our own personal arsenal that are in need of transformation?
- In what ways can you respond to Jesus’s call to nonviolence? How might you be invited to present in our communities, cities, and society?



FAITH IN ACTION

- Prayer is a critical way to process an experience of trauma or harm, listen for God's wisdom in how to respond and attend to our individual needs and find meaning in our pain. Watch the recommended video about how prayer and the ministry of presence is breaking cycles of violence: <http://bit.ly/2ivHiTP>.
- The arts can also provide a powerful outlet for our emotions in difficult times. Think of something you struggle with at this time and create or find a poem, dance, visual art, or music that brings comfort.
- Murder victim's family members know the importance of healing and forgiveness better than most. Watch Vicki Schieber, CMN speaker and co-founder of Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights, share the story of the murder of her daughter and her journey toward reconciliation and the work to end the death penalty: <http://bit.ly/Vicki1>.



PRAYER

God of love, help us to live beyond our experiences of suffering,
To respond to acts of harm with mercy rather than vengeance.

Guide us as we seek opportunities for reconciliation and transformation,
And give us the grace to stand against a culture of violence
For a world of peace. Amen.



— Reflection by Caitlin Morneau

Imagine yourself as a vendor at the temple—seeking to earn a living by selling birds. You come here every week, just as your parents did. You trade what little means the locals have scavenged together for a dove or pigeon that will be offered as sacrifice in the temple. You charge more than they are worth, but that is what all of the vendors do. After all, families will do whatever it takes to be cleansed, partake in sacred ritual, and receive God's acceptance as tradition tells them can only be done with animal sacrifice. Then, without warning, a man who appears to be like any other pilgrim storms through the market in a rage, pushing over your table and others. This abrupt action sends oxen and sheep running. He demands that all of the vendors leave immediately (John 2:13-16).

You hear someone say that this man is Jesus, the one you've heard about curing the sick and feeding the crowds. How could this be the same man? Where could such anger and rage possibly come from? You gather the remnants of your belongings and walk home troubled, confused, and wondering—what was the meaning of all of this?

The practice of money changing at the temple was the status quo. It was the manifestation of a system

Third Sunday of Lent

March 4, 2018

+ + +

"But whoever lives
the truth comes to the light,
so that his works
may be clearly seen
as done in God."

— John 3:21

+ + +

First Reading

Exodus 20:1-17

Responsorial Psalm

Psalms 19:8-11

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 1:22-25

Gospel

John 2:13-25



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that categorized people based on their wealth. The quality of animal that a person could purchase and offer as sacrifice in the temple represented their status in the community and afforded some the privileges of religious rites over others. This was the practice of the time. It is what had always been done and was not questioned by those who participated. Contrary to the purpose and sacredness of the temple, this practice manipulated traditional understandings of what it meant to be faithful to God. Today, we have done the same thing with our societal understanding of atoning for wrong doings.

Most of us have lived with a punitive, adversarial justice system for our entire lives. If you break a law, you go to court, guilt is assigned and you go to prison. Isolation is seen as the obvious



punishment, thought to teach a certain lesson to those who break the law and act as a deterrent to others who might consider it.

But time in prison often does not serve this assumed purpose. In the United States, individuals who live in poverty, people of color, or those with mental illness, or intellectual disability are disproportionately more likely to be incarcerated in their lifetime. While in prison, a lack of access to education, healthcare, recovery services, and other programs mean that true rehabilitation

cannot be realized. As a result of these and other factors, those reentering society face barriers to employment, housing, education, and other means of socioeconomic advancement upon release. All of these contribute to a classing system, not unlike the one that Jesus was calling attention to at the temple—a system that devalues the inherent human dignity of individuals who experience incarceration. This has been the reality of the United States justice system for so long that it is simply accepted as “the way it is.” Injustice that goes on for too long inhibits our ability to imagine what an alternative could look like.

“Justice” is, in some ways, an elusive term. We each have different conceptions of what it might mean. The U.S. criminal justice system tells us that assigning guilt is paramount and that the punishment should fit the crime. Catholic social teaching tells us that justice is measured by the treatment of the most poor and vulnerable among us. Jesus taught that God’s justice is a reconciling justice. One in which even sinners and tax collectors have hope for redemption. By turning over the tables in the temple, Jesus drew attention to the need to disrupt the unjust



system of the time in a dramatic fashion, prompting onlookers to imagine a new way of rebuilding, a new way of understanding what is fair and just, what is God's way.

In the book of Exodus, God lays out his laws for us. We know these commandments so well, "You shall not kill, you shall not steal..." (Exodus 20:1-17). But the Gospels give us examples of times that these commandments were broken and the sinner was not met with banishment or harsh punishment. Instead, they were met with love, compassion, mercy, and forgiveness. We know that to break one of these commandments, is to violate our relationship with God. However, because we are given the sacrament of reconciliation, we can turn to God in our weakness and shame and be restored in love and heavenly embrace.



Photo Credit: Scott Langley

There is great mystery and beauty in this. In our humanity we are flawed, we are broken. We can never know fully what it is to live into God's vision for justice because even God's foolishness and weakness supersedes the heights of human wisdom and strength (1 Corinthians 1:22-25). Yet, we can continually strive to realize it here on earth.

How many times do we carry out our own actions because it is "the way we've always done it"? We eat food that was cultivated in a way that is harmful to the environment. We purchase clothes that were produced by workers not paid a living wage. We make unconscious judgements about others based on their skin color, education level, job, or apparent income. We are all culpable of perpetuating systems of injustice; but our awareness of this can move us out of complacency and into action. Action that builds the Kingdom of God. We will surely stumble, and we will even more surely fall, but if we look to the cross as a reminder of Christ's sacrifice, we may draw ever closer to living God's justice in the world.

In cases of grave harm, some form of punishment is appropriate. Incarceration is necessary when the safety of others is in jeopardy. But from a Catholic perspective, punishment must be accompanied by means for rehabilitation and hope for redemption. This entails seeking restorative encounter, authentic accountability, and opportunities for amends in the wake of harm. It also means taking a critical look at the systems that seem to perpetuate "the way it has always been" and questioning whether they truly manifest God's justice and honor human dignity. It means asking serious questions about how God calls us to be in relationship with one another—not only individually but through our institutions. If necessary, we may need to turn over tables so that God's vision may be realized.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- An overly punitive, adversarial criminal justice system, and practices of mass incarceration are examples of systems that do not promote human dignity. What are other examples of systems that are not representative of God's vision for justice?
- John Paul Lederach, a Professor of International Peacebuilding at the University of Notre Dame, and a Distinguished Scholar at Eastern Mennonite University, writes that the moral imagination is "the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist." How do we acknowledge the realities of our present brokenness, while envisioning and working toward a better future?
- What are ways that you have or feel called to "turn over the tables," to draw attention to unjust systems and practices in our country and world?

FAITH IN ACTION

- Consider this quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself." Get involved in addressing an injustice present in your community and promote the restorative call of the Gospel.
- Visit <http://bit.ly/RJStatements> to read the USCCB's document, *Responsibility, Rehabilitation and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice* and learn more about the Church's call to restorative justice.
- Restorative practices in response to harm are a way of disrupting cycles of violence and transforming a broken criminal justice system. Present a workshop on Restorative Justice practices in your parish or community. To download resources, go to <http://bit.ly/2ARJZCx>.

PRAYER

God of Justice, guide us along the ways of your mercy. Help us to see our neighbors as you see them and allow us to be vessels for your healing grace. Fill us with understanding and forgiveness as we seek to transform our society into one where reconciliation and restoration replace vengeance. Give us the compassion to embrace the human dignity of our sisters and brothers and to see them as more than the offenses they have committed. Send us your Spirit as we work to create a more just world. Amen.



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— Reflection by Karen Clifton, M.Div.

The Old Testament stories of the exiled Israelites in Babylon were a tale of their sins against God. When reading these stories, we probably question, why do they continue to sin against a God who has provided everything for them and on whom they are dependent for their existence? And yet, we do the same thing. How often are we confessing the same sins year after year? How often do we refuse to forgive those who have sinned against us and have asked to be forgiven?

Despite their continued unfaithfulness, God is faithful to them. We all count on the gift of God's mercy. We also rest assured of the gift of salvation through His son who was lifted up on a cross for our sins.

Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!"
(Psalm 137:6)

We also continue to sin each day, and take it for granted that we have a free pass to forgiveness through God's mercy. Then we stand by and let our government pronounce people unforgivable. Close to 3,000 people are on death row in this country. We have the means to keep society safe with maximum security prisons, but we elect to kill people who commit violent crimes or are considered accomplices in the act. The stories in scripture make it perfectly clear that God has the capacity to forgive. Our faith

Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 11, 2018

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"God so loved the world
that he gave his only Son,
so everyone who believes
in him might have eternal life.

– John 3:16

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First Reading

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23

Responsorial Psalm

Psalms 137:1-6

Second Reading

Ephesians 2:4-10

Gospel

John 3:14



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is based on the love God has for us all. Moses made a serpent out of bronze and raised it as a standard. Anyone who was bitten by a serpent and looked at the bronze serpent survived. Just as the people's faith in God's promise to Moses saved them. Our faith in Jesus is our salvation.

Who was Moses? Moses was a murderer. Did God condemn him to death? No. Did God forgive him? Yes. Did God go on and use him for good? Yes. Who are we to condemn others to die? Does our Church call us to be "soft on crime" or murder? No.

Our Church calls us to respond to acts of violence with retribution. It is true that some people need to be removed from society in order to protect others from further acts of grave harm. But our Church also says our response to harm must be restorative. Scripture continually calls us to be in right relationship with one another. We are called to be a community that works to rehabilitate people, to restore them to community, and to allow them the opportunity to hear God's voice in his timing, not ours. We are not God. We do not know how God will use people who have committed grave harm. King David, the ancestor of Jesus, had Uriah killed. When confronted by the prophets, David repented. Scriptures are full of stories of how God exhibited mercy toward those who committed acts of grave harm. We, too, are called to be a merciful people.

"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17).

Prisons are filled with stories of how people who have committed acts of grave harm, yet have done good things after experiencing the mercy of God. For example, some inmates who are sentenced to life in prison spend their days caring for those in hospice within the prisons. There are people who are working to provide restitution for the children of their victims. There are



James Allridge, executed by the state of Texas on August 26, 2004.

other stories of people who enter prison angry and victimized by society but choose another path. Over time, some inmates even serve as mentors and spiritual counselors to the young people who enter. My son benefitted from the wisdom of one of those mentors.

James Allridge III was an amazing artist. With just a box of pencil colors he could "find the light of God" within plants, flowers, and animals. Years ago, my high school age son, Andrew, met James Allridge's brother, Stanley, at an event benefitting the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. Andrew asked Stanley for James' address so he could write him to tell him how much he appreciated his art. James wrote back. A friendship began.



As the letters began arriving from death row, I, as a detective mother, managed to find every hidden letter. Andrew informed me that this was his relationship, not mine. James, in beautiful prose, spoke about the gift of freedom, family—being able to enjoy nature, friendships, and how important it was to value and cherish all of these things.

When James was given his execution date, Andrew announced that he was going to Austin to testify for James instead of going to school. I immediately told him that I was going too. I listened as my son talked about how he had a great father and was fortunate to have amazing teachers at a Jesuit High School. He had plenty of good mentors. He never dreamed he would find a mentor on death row who would teach him about the value of life, love, and family.⁷

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life" (John 3:16).

James was executed on the second week of Andrew starting college. Despite our suggestions that he remain at school, he flew himself home to be present. It was torture to watch the victimization of all of the people who loved James. Many, many people experienced a part of themselves being killed with him. This was not restorative. This was not emulating the mercy of God that our faith calls us to do.



Archbishop Desmond Tutu was also touched by one of the mentors on Texas' death row, Dominique Green's writings and artwork. The Archbishop came to visit Dominique on death row in Huntsville, Texas. As we waited for the Archbishop to return to St. Luke's Episcopal Church after his visit, he was mobbed by reporters. He kept repeating, "Dominique is a remarkable advertisement for God." He talked about how he was humbled to be in Dominique's presence "because he felt like he was in the presence of God. This is not the monster that many would expect or think, but a human being, a human being who has grown. He's like a flower opening and you see the petals come up, particularly when you see him speaking about his concern for others. He wasn't self-pitying. I'm glad I came. I come away deeply enriched from my encounter with an extraordinary man. He is a remarkable young man and it would be one of the greatest tragedies if someone like Dominique were executed."⁸

"...whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God" (John 3:21).

⁷ Karen Clifton, Personal Story of relationship with James Vernon Allridge III, September 2017.

⁸ Charles Cahill, "A Saint on Death Row: The Story of Dominique Greene," Nan A. Talese, 2009.



"I am not angry, but I am disappointed that I was denied justice. But I am happy that I was afforded you all as family and friends. You all have been there for me; it's a miracle. I love you...I am not as strong as I thought I was going to be. But I guess it only hurts for a little while. You all are my family.

*Please keep my memory alive."*⁹

— Dominique Green, Last Statement

(On October 26, 2004, Dominique was executed by lethal injection in Huntsville, Texas.)

Dominique spent twenty-three hours a day in solitary confinement and one hour a day for either a shower or out into a cage outside where he could see the sky if he looked up. Now that is torture. That is death row.

Who are we killing? Where is the mercy? Yes, there are people who need to be confined for their safety and ours, but we need to read the scriptures to find our way back from this pendulum swing from harsh retribution and to remember we are called to be restorative people—a people of forgiveness and mercy.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life" (John 3:16).

⁹ Bill Moyers, "Dominique Green," PBS, 2007, <http://to.pbs.org/1fiOGWJ>.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Who do we "condemn to death" by disregarding them or "writing them off" because they have harmed us or others?
- Andrew became a companion to James and insisted upon walking with him in his darkest hour. What does companionship mean to you?
- When have you been companioned either physically or spiritually? How did it help?



FAITH IN ACTION

- Visit <http://bit.ly/CMNDeathPenalty> and scroll down to the map. Click on states where you've lived to find out about the use of the death penalty where you live.
- Lift up the need to end the use of the death penalty in our society. Inspired by the need for mercy in our society, CMN's Mercy prayer vigil includes reflections on scripture and intersections for all those in need of healing. This vigil can serve as a thoughtful prayer tool in those times leading up to, and in the aftermath of an execution: <http://bit.ly/CMNMercyVigil>.

PRAYER



Original artwork by James Allridge, who was executed by the state of Texas on August 26, 2004. (Photo Credit: Andrew Clifton, used with permission.)

God of Mercy,
We are grateful for the "saints" among us
Who remind us to be instruments of your mercy.

We are grateful for the gift of your Son,
His lack of condemnation
And our salvation we receive through Him.

Help us to be your instruments of mercy
As we work to change broken systems of justice
That foster vengeance, not restoration and healing,
For those involved in incidents of harm.

Let us be ever-mindful of the far-rippling
Effects of all acts of violence.

We ask all of these things in the name of your Son
Who forgave those who executed him. Amen.



— Reflection by Alexandra Carroll, M.T.S.

In response to years of war and violent conflict, a small community in northwest Columbia, came together and decided that peace, not war, was the way to stand against the violence the townspeople were experiencing. The Peace Village of San José de Apartadó is a community of roughly 1,500 people that are committed to cooperative living and non-participation in the violent conflict in Colombia.¹⁰ The community, with its roots in farming, has existed since the 1960s and; in 1997 declared itself a 'Peace Community' upholding the values of nonviolence, noninvolvement in the conflict, no use or presence of weapons, drugs, or alcohol in the community; and mutual support and transparency within the community.

Despite the community's commitment to peace, they have been repeatedly targeted for attack by military, paramilitary, and guerilla forces. Since its founding, approximately 200 members of the Peace Village have been killed, including victims of 20 massacres by different armed groups.¹¹ Even with the continued violence and trauma experienced by the people, the peace community has persisted. They continued to

¹⁰ "Comunidad de Paz de San José de Apartadó," Peace Insight, accessed September 30, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2AAjczA>.

¹¹ Ibid.

Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 18, 2018

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"Whoever serves me
must follow me,
says the Lord; and where I am,
there also will my servant be."

– John 12:26

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First Reading

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Responsorial Psalm

Psalms 51:3-4, 12-15

Second Reading

Hebrews 5:7-9

Gospel

John 12:20-33



serve as an inspiration and a reminder of the important role human rights and nonviolence can serve in rebuilding and repairing harm. When a peace accord was signed by the Colombian Government and Rebel Forces in August 2016, the community served as an example of the long process of healing the wounds from years of violence and war began.

In his historic visit to the country in September of 2017, Pope Francis encouraged the Colombians in their process of healing, lifting up what the peace community had discovered long ago: "You realized that it is not possible to live with resentment, but only with a love that liberates and builds. And so you also began to heal the wounds of other victims, to rebuild their dignity. This going out of yourself has enriched you, has helped you look ahead, find peace and serenity and a reason to keep moving forward."¹² Trust in the power of the Gospel, in power of reconciliation and transformation can begin the path toward healing. Transformation after violence and devastation, as Pope Francis reminded us, must begin within before it can move outward.

Since the time of the early Israelites, God was steadfast in the promise of "new life" found through faith. As we near the end of Lent, this idea of new life is ever more relevant. The image of peace and new life found in the resurrection is something we constantly hope and wait for. In a time where people are increasingly asking the question, "how can I possibly find life after violence and devastation?" the readings this week point us toward a deeper reflection on what it means to have faith in the promises of God.

Jeremiah speaks about the new covenant that God will create with the Israelites. This is unlike any covenant made before; rather than written on stone, this covenant will be written on the hearts of the faithful (Jeremiah 31:33). Yahweh will no longer remember their sins, but instead, be their God and they God's people (Jeremiah 31:34). This is the point of transformation for the entire relationship between the Israelites and God. No longer are the Israelites trying to atone for their past mistakes, but are simply asked to have faith. In allowing God to transform them from within, "new life" in covenant with God can be found.



In Japanese culture there is an ancient tradition called Kintsugi. When a piece of pottery breaks, rather than discarding it, it is bound together again using gold, silver or platinum. "This repair method celebrates each artifact's unique history by emphasizing its fractures and breaks instead of hiding or disguising them. Kintsugi often makes the repaired piece even more beautiful than the original, revitalizing it with new life."

¹² Pope Francis, "Encounter for the Reconciliation of Columbia," September 8, 2017, *Rome Reports*, <http://bit.ly/2AhjW8D>.

This inner transformation is not easy. Sometimes an experience of harm cannot be completely healed, and relationships can never be fully restored to the way they once were. We can, however, allow our hearts to be transformed. We can find new life and new relationships if we work to attend to our brokenness with mercy and reconciliation so that we, too, are able to form new covenants with each other. Just as Christ offered “loud cries and tears” (Hebrew. 5:7), so too, we are invited to cry out in lament to God so as to prepare our hearts to be opened. This is not an activity we often allow ourselves—the time to mourn, to lament what has been lost, what could have been, and what can be no longer.

Lament, however, has long been a cornerstone of our faith. The Israelites lamented their strife, the disciples will soon grieve for their Lord, but all too often we force ourselves to move on without allowing ourselves the opportunity to mourn in our own lives. Especially when the harm cannot be undone, when our life cannot be fully restored, lament is key to understanding what “new life” means.

We must mourn this life before we can begin to understand the next one. Only after lamenting and allowing ourselves to grieve what could have been can our hearts be opened to new possibilities. It was only after mourning his impending death that Jesus “learned obedience from what he suffered” (Hebrew 5:9). The people of Columbia have lamented their experiences and have come to understand that only through mercy and reconciliation with each other can they find new life. When we join together and begin to repair the harm that has occurred in our lives we allow God to work within our hearts.



This transformation is central to understanding and bringing about the Kingdom of God in our society. Jesus illustrates this in John’s gospel with the example of a grain of wheat, “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit” (John 12:24). Only through personal transformation, in mourning and moving on from a time of great harm can we find new life. We must trust that the brokenness we feel, the anguish and pain we have experienced, can be healed. Only then, with true faith in the promise and love of God can we discover a clean heart. Only when we find ourselves able to look beyond an experience of pain can we begin to restore a broken relationship.

This is a process the people of Colombia, especially in the peace community, have started with their peace accord. Reconciliation is not an easy process, in fact being able to trust and



welcome those who have caused great harm is incredibly difficult. Feelings of pain and memories of suffering have to be lamented, remembered and used as motivation to build something greater.

“Even when conflicts, violence and feelings of vengeance remain, may we not prevent justice and mercy from embracing Colombia’s painful history. Let us heal that pain and welcome every person who has committed offences, who admits their failures, is repentant and truly wants to make reparation, thus contributing to the building of a new order where justice and peace shine forth,” Francis poignantly reminded the Colombian people.¹³

True Christian discipleship demands a solidarity only possible with a transformed heart. Wounds or harms that we experience in life are like a tear in a quilt. It may be a large rip, or a small tear. Regardless of size, it could take a long time to stitch up or not long at all. Either way, the quilt is never quite the same. When reminders of that pain come along, it may pull some of the stitches apart and need to be repaired yet again. It may someday be completely rebound, or not. Regardless, that mended part, obviously visible or not, is now undeniably a part of that quilt. Just as our past hurt, even when repaired in some form or another, can become a new part of our life. Until we can trust in the promises of a future beyond our pain and fear, we cannot bring about a more just society. Personal transformation is the first step. As the peace community in Columbia remind us, only when we can allow God to open our hearts can we begin to open the hearts of others.

¹³ Pope Francis, “Encounter for the Reconciliation of Columbia,” September 8, 2017, *Rome Reports*, <http://bit.ly/2AhjW8D>.

REFLECTION QUESTION

- Consider the image of the quilt or the Kintsugi bowl, what is a wound in your life that is now a part of what makes you who you are? How has that wound affected your relationship with God? How has that wound affected your ability to live out the your faith and it’s call to reconciliation?
- What can you do to allow God to give you a clean heart? How can you let the grains of wheat in your life fall to the ground and begin anew?
- How can you make your community one where “justice and peace shine forth”? What role can you play in the transformation and reconciliation of those around you?



FAITH IN ACTION

- Bridges To Life is a faith-based program that aims to bring healing to victims of crime, reduces recidivism among offender graduates of the program, and helps make our community a safer place. Watch this short video to learn more about this program: <http://bit.ly/2gE0oGJ>.
- Discover ways you can live out the call to restoration and reconciliation in your personal life. CMN's interactive infographic shows how you can bring the principles of restorative justice into your everyday interactions: <http://bit.ly/RJInfo>.



PRAYER

Grant me, O God, a clean heart.

Help me to move forward from experiences of sorrow,
And fill me with the courage to live with mercy.

As I weep for the past, help me to transform my lament
Into acts of justice and healing.

God, grant me the grace and clarity to see
Beyond my current pain to the newness of life found in Christ.

Guide me toward reconciliation with those
Who have committed acts of harm.

May we trust in your guidance and open our hearts to new life. Amen.





— Reflection by Marianne Race, C.S.J.

There is scant mention of Joseph in the Scriptures, yet he is one of the most beloved Saints in all of Church history. There is not one recorded word spoken by Joseph in the Scriptures, yet from the earliest decades he has been honored as a significant member of the Holy Family. Two of the gospels, those attributed to Mark and John, do not even mention Joseph. The little that we do know about him comes from Matthew and Luke. Matthew's gospel begins with the genealogy of Jesus. The purpose is to show the lineage of Jesus from Abraham and David to this moment of the Incarnation. The list of names ends with Joseph, husband of Mary (Matthew 1:16).

The inclusion of Joseph here is certainly a clue to his significance in the plan of God that brought Jesus into this world in human form. While Gabriel was visiting Mary (Luke 1:26-38) who was wide-awake and astounded by her visitor's message, another angel was quietly delivering a different message to Joseph while he was sleeping (Matthew 1:18-25). Both were told not to be afraid. Both of them listened. Both of them accepted the incomprehensible invitation into this mystery. From this moment we know Joseph as protector. He took his pregnant fiancé into his home and protected her reputation. Later, after Jesus was born, when King Herod decreed the murder of infant

Solemnity of St. Joseph

March 19, 2018

+ + +

"Blessed are those who dwell
in your house, O Lord;
they never cease
to praise you."

– Psalm 84:5

+ + +

First Reading

2 Samuel 7:4-5A, 12-14A, 16

Responsorial Psalm

Psalms 89:2-5, 27, 29

Second Reading

Romans 4:13, 16-18, 22

Gospel

Matthew 1:16, 18-21, 24A



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boys, Joseph fled from Bethlehem taking Mary and the child to Egypt. To protect his family, he left everything and became a refugee. Millions of refugees around the world today experience what Joseph experienced, the loss of dignity, the loss of their meager possessions, the terror of an abusive government and significant peril to their loved ones. Like many families in our society today Joseph and his family were victims of a heinous crime, the crime perpetrated by King Herod. Years later, when the threat of danger had passed, Joseph once again was inspired in a dream to return to his homeland. It was then that he brought his family to the little village of Nazareth in Galilee.

There is one other incident in which the Holy Family is mentioned in Scripture. Mary and Joseph joined others on their annual journey to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. They would have traveled in a caravan with relatives and neighbors. On the way home they noticed that their son was not with them. They expected that he was with some of their relatives. But when they discovered that he was not, like any parent they were very worried. They returned to Jerusalem and searched for three days. When the boy was found his mother scolded him with the words, "Why have you done this to us? You see that your father and I have been searching for you in sorrow" (Luke 2:48). This incident of parenthood challenges is often overlooked because of the importance of Jesus's response to Mary's words. Yet father and mother are both exercising the very important but very ordinary role of protecting their children.

Joseph is also remembered for making his livelihood as a carpenter, someone who worked with his hands. Following the tradition of his time his son would have worked with him and learned this trade. This ordinary daily means of supporting his family brings dignity to all workers. Joseph the carpenter is an example for all of us of the holiness of human labor. In 1870 Pope Pius IX declared Joseph as patron of the Universal Church. In his decree he said, "Joseph now cares for and watches over the church and models for all the dignity of human work."¹⁴ To foster deep devotion to Saint Joseph among Catholics, and in response to the "May Day" celebrations for workers sponsored by Communists, Pope Pius XII instituted the feast of Saint Joseph the Worker in 1955, dedicated to laborers and all working persons

On this date in 2013, Pope Francis decreed that the name of St. Joseph should be inserted into Eucharistic Prayers II, III, and IV. In many of the documents issued by Pope John XXIII, Pope Paul VI, the Second Vatican Council, and Pope John Paul II, reference is made to the Christian spirit that should permeate one's work, after the example of St. Joseph. In his encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, Pope John Paul II stated: "The Church considers it her task always to call attention to the dignity and rights of those who work, to condemn situations in which that dignity and those rights are violated, and to help guide social changes so as to ensure authentic progress by humanity and society."¹⁵ Saint Joseph is held up as the one who brings dignity to labor, his own and all workers.

¹⁴ Fr. Don Miller, O.F.M., "Saint Joseph the Worker," *Franciscan Media*, <http://bit.ly/2oxrFgP>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

I became a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph when I was 18 years old. I was attracted to the women in this congregation because they were smart, fun to be with, and very down to earth. They laughed easily, pinned up their long skirts to play sports, and obviously had a lot of joy in their life. Their humanity was evident despite the religious habit that attempted to make them anonymous. Like Joseph, these women seem to me to be ordinary human beings. Their work was ordinary, mostly behind the scenes. They didn't need fanfare or to be the most important person in the room. Like Joseph, they were humble.

Years later, after working in education for many years and serving as the principle of our high school, Nazareth Academy, I had the opportunity to be a student at Catholic Theological Union of Chicago. I participated in their Israel Study Program, 11 weeks in the Holy Land. When we visited Nazareth in Galilee, home of Joseph and Mary, I really hoped to have some celestial recognition that I was a Sister of Saint Joseph from Nazareth Academy. That did not happen, of course. Instead I saw people who looked and dressed like me. There were Boy Scouts in uniform, a young mother pushing a stroller, grocery stores, and ordinary people everywhere.

My reflection later was the awesome realization that in this little remote village a young man and young woman received messages from angels and paid attention. They did not doubt them. Because of their receptivity to the Spirit of God, the Incarnation happened. Because of our receptivity to the Spirit of God, the Incarnation continues to happen day after day.

Joseph was humble, obedient, prudent, and wise. These ordinary and simple virtues are necessary to be good and genuine followers of Jesus Christ. May we be blessed by his spirit of faithful service, humility, gentleness, and charity.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What aspect of Joseph's relationship with Mary and Jesus is most meaningful for you? Why?
- How might Joseph be a mentor for you as he was for Jesus? What particular virtues of Joseph do you most need right now?
- In your family responsibilities when have you been called upon to guide and protect your children?
- Are you open and trusting that the Spirit of God provides insights for you, even in your dreams?

PRAYER

Our heavenly God,
In memory of St. Joseph,
We ask for the gift of faithful listening.

We ask you to guide us in our work,
In our prayer, and in all of our actions.

May we always be mindful of the dignity of all life.

Bless all workers, especially those whose work
Involves care for the least among us.

Grant us the humility to be ever dependent on you
And to be open and receptive to your will. Amen.

St. Joseph, pray for us.



Center of
Concern



— Reflection by Alexandra Carroll, M.T.S.

Palm Sunday signals a turning point in our Lenten journey. No longer in a time of reflection and contemplation, we rejoice and anticipate the fulfillment of Jesus's promises on Easter Sunday. More importantly, Palm Sunday serves as a transition point from the solitude of Lent to communal action—no longer is the community to wait alone in somber repentance, but challenged to move into action. We are to use Palm Sunday to prepare ourselves for the Triduum, to turn our focus to the heart of Jesus's message and to allow the gospel to fill our hearts and inspire our minds to act against injustice in our society. Palm Sunday challenges us to take up the countercultural work of Jesus and resist acts of injustice in our society.

In 1993, the city of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, began experiencing the occurrence of *feminicide*, a political term used to indicate state responsibility for the brutal murder of women and girls founded on a gender power structure. This gender-based violence was systemic and rooted in social, political, and economic inequalities. By April 2009, it was reported that "more than six hundred girls and women had been tortured, raped, and murdered, most between the ages of ten and thirty."¹⁶

¹⁶ Nancy Pineda-Madrid, "Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juárez," Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 13.

Palm Sunday

March 25, 2018

+ + +

"The Lord GOD has given me
a well-trained tongue,
that I might know how to speak
to the weary a word
that will waken them."

– Isaiah 50:4

+ + +

First Reading

Isaiah 50:4-7

Responsorial Psalm

Psalms 22:8-9, 17-20, 23-24

Second Reading

Philippians 2:6-11

Gospel

Mark 14:1-15:47



In the midst of these ongoing acts of violence community members created networks of activists to demand public accountability and call for the feminicide to end. They organized marches and protests on annual days of significance and; established the symbolic ritual of placing large pink and black crosses throughout the city on electrical poles to remind the community they had not forgotten about these women and girls—that they would not let these acts of gender violence be silenced.¹⁷

The appearance of pink and black crosses throughout Ciudad Juárez, stand as acts of resistance from the community against the horrific violence occurring in their communities. This public response interrupted the prevailing social norms. No longer are horrific crimes against women and girls ignored, but through these acts of communal resistance, the difficult work of healing can begin. Just as Jesus resisted the norms of power and social corruption of his time, so too, in their acts of resistance, the community of Ciudad Juárez reveals what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

The Gospel of Mark presents us with perhaps the clearest vision of the four gospels of the extent to which Christ is countercultural (Mark 11:2-6). Up until this point Jesus's true identity as the Messiah has been kept secret—the profound nature of this reality too much for the people to bear. As he enters Jerusalem, Jesus hides his true identity no longer; for the first time we are fully able to see that rather than the traditional model of the powerful King, Jesus stands against the cultural norms. This can be understood as seeing Christ stand against culture, something theologian H. Richard Niebuhr explains conveys a faithfulness to Christ that demands a rejection of societal norms.¹⁸



Pink crosses in Olvera street, Los Angeles, as remembrance for the murdered women of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, on the Day of the Dead, November 1, 2005. (Photo Credit, Jim Winstead, Los Angeles, California.)

The heart of the Gospel message cannot easily be reconciled with normal tendencies of our society. Those who have come to understand this, like the community members in Ciudad Juárez, have had their ears opened (Isaiah 50:5) and realize that the message of Christ is not one of power and strength, but one of grace and mercy. Obedience to the prophetic call of the Markan image of Jesus is an extreme denial of all that our society has led us to believe is “just” and “fair.”

¹⁷ Ibid., 99-100

¹⁸ H Richard Niebuhr, “Christ & Culture,” New York, Harper, San Francisco, 2001.

As Jesus prepares for his impending suffering for the sake of the radicalness of the Kingdom of God, so too are we to prepare for acts of countercultural resistance. This call to live out the Gospel message is not one meant to be easily accepted or completed (Isaiah 50:6). Palm Sunday calls us to something difficult, but something immensely profound.

Paul reveals the true power of this gospel call in his command to live with an obedience that is in service to world. Just as Christ emptied himself and allowed himself to be humbled to the lowly level of a slave (Philippians 2:7-8), so too, are we called to humble ourselves. What does that really mean? It can sometimes be easy to take a step toward true humility and service, yet we can still remain comfortably in our ways. Paul leaves no room for error, however, and clarifies that it is Jesus's obedience unto death that has proven him to be the exalted one (Philippians 2:8). The call to discipleship demands such obedience. Only in our humility to accept obedience to the very thing that is so deeply against the tendency of our society is the full extent of the Kingdom can become clear. We are to live in service of those around us—to bring forth justice in world fixed on vengeance and destruction. Palm Sunday calls us into the streets, into the prisons, and into the shadows to bring light.

Mark's depiction of the crucifixion furthers this understanding of Jesus as a counter-cultural Messiah. Jesus dies alone and in anguish forsaken by everyone. It is here, from this point of despair and humiliation, where the climax of Mark's narrative is found: "When the centurion who stood facing him saw how he breathed his last he said, 'Truly this man was the Son of God'" (Mark 15:39). In this



Photo Credit: Scott Langley

moment of great weakness, Jesus is seen at his most exalted. The suffering servant has become the compassionate son of God. The heart of the gospel is a call to deep weakness, to a counter-cultural way of life centered around the suffering Messiah. In redefining God's promise to bring a great Messiah, Mark has reestablished what it means to be a Christian. The call to visit the prisoners, to feed the hungry, and clothe the naked all take on new meaning in light of this understanding. An obedience to the call of Palm Sunday demands deep and routed strength in the grace and mercy Christ reveals on the cross.



As we begin this Holy Week, we are called to a strict obedience to the gospel message. We are challenged to move from our somber piety to communal acts of resistance. Families pulled apart by deportation, women and children lacking access to affordable health care, people without housing, kids with inadequate education, and people fleeing climate devastation and war-torn villages—all demand a response. Just as the community of Ciudad Juárez found strength in their refusal to conform to an unjust societal norm, we are called to embrace the countercultural call of Christ. We are invited to see the true strength in the prophetic final days of Christ's life and commit ourselves to a similar strength. Our task as Christians is to live in a way that brings the counter-cultural message of the gospel into realization in our society today.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What injustices do you witness in your community? What can you do to bring attention to and end such instances?
- Was there ever a time where you were complacent in a situation of injustice? Has there ever been a time where you stood up against such unjust circumstances? What was it that compelled you to act or not act?
- How are you being invited to bring the countercultural message of the Gospel to reality in our your community, society, and world?



FAITH IN ACTION

- Educate your communities of the injustices of our criminal justice system. CMN has interactive and informative workshops for faith groups, communities, and families that help to illuminate the arbitrary and unjust realities of the death penalty in our society. Visit <http://bit.ly/CMNWorkshops> to learn more.
- Organize or participate in a day of action in your community. Call attention to a social justice issue of your passion by joining a solidarity march, delivering a signed petition to an elected official, or holding a prayer vigil for victims of violence. CMN has several resources for prayerful action around the death penalty and criminal justice: <http://bit.ly/CMNPrayer>.
- Watch the movie or read the book *Dead Man Walking* about Sr. Helen Prejean and her journey to the work of death penalty abolition. Reflect on the experiences and devastation of state sanctioned executions and become and advocate for the dignity of all life.

PRAYER

Loving God,
Grant us the strength to live as Christ did.

Open our eyes to the injustices of our society
And ignite a flame in our hearts.

Allow us to be vessels for your counter-cultural
Message of justice and mercy.

Empower us to confront and show mercy
To those who oppress and liberate those held captive.

May we always remember the humility and courage
With which Christ lived as we seek
To transform our world. Amen.





— Reflection by Caitlin Morneau

Last year, on this liturgical day, Pope Francis surprised many by washing the feet of twelve individuals at Paliano prison just outside of Vatican City. The group included three women and one Muslim man who was converting to Catholicism. In his homily at the Mass, Pope Francis reminded us that in Jesus's gesture of washing the feet of the disciples at the Last Supper, "He came into this world to serve, to serve us. He came to make himself a slave for us, to give his life for us and to love us to the end." He continued, "I ask that if you can perform a help or a service for your companions in prison, do it...This is love. This is like washing feet. It means being the servant of the others."¹⁹

What does it mean to be a servant of others? In secular culture we refer to the golden rule, "Treat others as you'd like to be treated." One could say this principle is based upon the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. Some have built upon this idea to suggest a platinum rule, "Treat others as they'd like to be treated." The platinum rule recognizes that we each have different preferences for how love is shown toward us.

¹⁹ Junno Arocho Esteves, "Pope Washes feet of 12 prison inmates at Holy Thursday Mass," *Catholic News Service*, April 13, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2pAzCxY>.

Holy Thursday

March 29, 2018

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"I give you a new
commandment,
says the Lord:
love one another
as I have loved you."

– John 33:34

+++

First Reading

Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14

Responsorial Psalm

Psalms 116:12-13, 15-16, 17-18

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Gospel

John 13:1-15



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But all of this pales in comparison to the new commandment that Jesus gives in John to “love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34). Jesus’s love for humanity is far beyond our human capacity for love. Perhaps the most difficult time to be a servant and model Jesus’s love is when we experience some kind of harm. Instances of harm—big and small—often lead us to become captured by anger, perhaps even rage or desire for revenge. Sound judgement becomes clouded by pain. We find our actions tainted by ill-will, hurt, rejection, and even confusion. Have you ever experienced anger initiated by a harm?

When we think of those who have committed grave harm—directed to us or to others—what would it take for us to step outside of ourselves, our assumptions, our initial judgements? What would it take to put on a new pair of eyes, God’s eyes, to see with eyes of mercy, love, and compassion?

Thought leader in the field of restorative justice, Howard Zehr, invites us to “change lenses.” Zehr says, “One of the lessons I have learned is how profoundly the lens I look through affects the outcome. My choice of lens determines in what circumstances I can work and how I see.”²⁰ Zehr’s insights on restorative justice invite us to shift our paradigm of thinking about instances of harm and systems of criminal justice, challenging us to imagine moving from responses of punishment and retribution to restoration, transformation, and healing.

When Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, he is challenging the disciples to change their lenses, see themselves and others through different eyes—eyes that view the powerful as weak and the meek and humble as leaders and examples. This means that we are to look to the poor and the vulnerable and make a point of surrounding ourselves by them—including those in prison or victims who have been directly impacted by crime. What would it mean to change our own lens?

At the heart of seeing differently is believing that redemption and transformation is possible. Even those most hardened and obstinate in their harmful ways can be changed. For example, Kelly Gissendaner was on death row for orchestrating the murder of her husband. While in prison, Kelly enrolled in a theology program hosted by local universities. She became enraptured by the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day, and others. Intrigued by his writings, Gissendaner wrote to and befriended the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, who visited her in prison and encouraged her in her studies. Fellow inmates testified to the ways that she had not only



Kelly Renee Gissendaner with the theologian Jürgen Moltmann in 2011, when she completed a prison theology program. Photo Credit: Ann Borden/Emory University.

²⁰ Howard Zehr, “Changing Lens,” Harrisonburg, Virginia, *Herald Press*, 2015.

transformed her own life, but also the lives of those around her. Her presence and words brought hope, peace, and light when other women were struggling. Through an intense study of theology, Gissendaner saw through a new set of eyes. Despite all of this, Kelly was executed by the state of Georgia on September 30, 2015.

As was the case for Kelly Gissendaner, sometimes those who do not enjoy the “luxuries” of community and societal benefits, such as steady employment, reliable housing, loving family and friends, are even more aware of their reliance on God. The Israelites recognized this reliance on God at Passover. For the love of their first born children, they trusted his message and followed his instructions knowing that no riches or possessions would spare them or their child (Exodus 12).

By turning to prayer in hardship times such as these, God can help us recognize the ways in which our human vision is flawed, how we are blinded by our own earthly human experience. Entering into this admission, we can instead ask that God help us see the other through God’s eyes, instead of our own. When we do this, we may be able to step outside of ourselves and see the fear, pain, and suffering that influenced the words or actions that hurt us. God offers a powerful perspective with which to see ourselves and those whom we encounter.

On the first Sunday of Lent, we reflected on covenant relationship. God gave the rainbow as an outward sign of his covenant with the earth and all those who dwell in it. At the last supper, Jesus gives his disciples the Eucharist as a constant reminder of his sacrificial love for us and the covenant that God formed with the people and the earth. Each time we enter



into this sacred liturgy, let us remember the call to change our lenses, to see through the eyes of God’s compassion, and to love others as God loves us.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “Judging others makes us blind, whereas love is illuminating. By judging others we blind ourselves to our own evil and to the grace which others are just as entitled to as we are.” How can you challenge yourself to see with eyes of love rather than judgement?
- Have you ever felt captured by anger? How would you name this experience? Have you taken this anger before God and asked for God’s grace in letting it go?
- Where is God calling you to show servant love? Where is there need of healing and restoration in your community?

FAITH IN ACTION

- In the words of Henri Nouwen, “Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.” Seek out an opportunity to visit with someone who is considered an outcast, a prisoner, or someone who was formerly incarcerated.
- Raise your voice for the dignity of all our sisters and brothers. CMN’s Mercy in Action Project gives you the tools you need to stand for life by opposing executions. Join the monthly execution alert program and contact elected officials on behalf of those awaiting execution: <http://bit.ly/MercyinAction>.

PRAYER

Loving God, help me to change my lenses so as to see others as you see them. Guide me on the path of discipleship as I seek to live with compassion. Fill my heart with your grace and understanding as I serve my sisters and brothers in need. As I work to love as you love, may I turn away from judgment and toward reconciliation, so as to embody the sacrificial love of Christ. Amen.





— Reflection by Alexandra Carroll, M.T.S.

On September 13, 2017, the state of Ohio executed Gary Otte. Gary lived a life of poverty, addiction, abuse, and violence. He took the lives of two people. Amidst much tragedy, he also found God.



Gary Otte, executed September 13, 2017, by the state of Ohio.

Read the Essay on drug addiction Gary wrote just days before his execution here: <http://bit.ly/2zzxWtG>.

Just days before his execution, Gary wrote a letter explaining how he used his faith in God to help him beat his addiction and turn his life around in prison.²¹

In the aftermath of inflicting great harm on his victims and their families, Otte spent his time in prison working to turn

from violence and harm to the saving power of God's grace. Depicting the power of forgiveness and the strength that comes from faith, Gary Otte's prophetic letter calls us all to greater humility and mercy in our efforts to create a more just society.

Good Friday

March 30, 2018

+ + +

"Because of his affliction
he shall see the light
in fullness of days;
through his suffering,
my servant shall justify many,
and their guilt he shall bear."

– Isaiah 53: 12

+ + +

First Reading

Isaiah 52:13—53:12

Responsorial Psalm

Psalms 31:2, 6, 12-13, 15-17, 25

Second Reading

Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9

Gospel

John 18:1—19:42

²¹ Eric Sandy, "Gary Otte Writes Essay on Drug Addiction Days Before Scheduled Execution in Ohio," *Cleveland Scene*, September 11, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2BIR5Un>.

Perhaps the most poignant moment of Gary Otte's short story is what happened on the morning of September 13, 2017. In his final moments, with his final breaths, Gary called out to God: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."²² We mourn and pray for Gary Otte's victims and their families. We also can not help but be struck by the events surrounding his execution. As we mark Good Friday, we are invited to let the events of Christ's death transform and compel us to stand up against the injustices of our world.

On Good Friday we observe in somber reflection the sacrifice that was made for us. Not as a barter for our redemption, nor as the only way to save our souls, but to show us the way of the Kingdom of God. In God's love for us, we are given the powerful and awe inspiring truth of the Gospel, that in Christ's death we can find new life. Christ's prophetic and countercultural call is too much for our society as it stands today. The shocking and earth shattering call to love your neighbor as yourself, to lose your life for the needs of another, cannot be fully understood without the actions of Good Friday.



Photo Credit: Scott Langley

The message of Christ becomes even more scandalized in light of Good Friday. The Messiah died in order to show us the way to true freedom, "He bore the punishment that makes us whole, by his wounds we were healed" (Isaiah 52:5). In dying on the cross Christ bore all that made us unable to hear the message to mercy and reconciliation. Now, as we remember this act of love we are called to live as though we have been given new life.

From the point of death on the cross, Jesus gave us this gift. Jesus forgives us. Depicted in John's gospel with the simple statement of "it is finished" (John 19:30). Jesus accepts his death and leaves us with the gift of the Spirit. In that moment we are given the gift of a forgiveness that never ceases. We are invited to feel, to mourn, and to respond in mercy. In the death of Christ on this Good Friday, we are given the opportunity to act in ways that change this pattern of violence.

²² Tray Connor, "Ohio Executes Double Murderer Gary Otte as He Signs Hymn," NBC News, September 13, 2017, <http://nbcnews.to/2eV9zhJ>.

Johann Baptist Metz, a German Theologian, begins his reflection on suffering in our society from the point of the cross. For Metz, the pivotal point of Christianity is the crucifixion of Christ, where Metz says that at the scene of the cross, Christians “faithfully remember the testament of his love, in which God’s dominion among men and women appeared precisely in the fact that dominion that human beings exercise over one another began to be pulled down, that Jesus declared himself to be on the side of the invisible ones.”²³ The memory of the crucifixion serves as a dangerous reminder of the call of discipleship. This “dangerous memory” of the crucifixion is to serve as a disruption in the continual cycle of violence and injustice we see in our society.²⁴ The memory of Christ’s crucifixion is to dangerously compel us toward action for the common good.

The events of Good Friday reveal the length to which humanity can take injustice; but in the dangerous memory of crucifixion of Jesus we are forever changed. We are now obligated to confront the state that crucifies in our name, to oppose injustice and to stand in solidarity with all those who are dehumanized, vilified, and crucified in our times. The dangerous memory of Christ’s death on the cross demands we question our continued use of violence today.

If Christ bore the sins to make us all whole, why do we continue to crucify each other? Why do we continue to allow the execution of individuals like Gary Otte, who while guilty of a grave wrong deserve the same opportunity for forgiveness and reconciliation that we do? How many more dangerous memories will it take for us to remember the call we were given as Christ died on the cross?

The dangerous memory of Christ’s crucifixion compels us to remember the 1463 people we have executed with the modern use of capital punishment. These memories serve as a stark reminder of the Gospel call to mercy and peace and oblige us to take action to bring this message of love and peace to fruition. Christian discipleship requires us to allow Good Friday to serve as an impetus to move beyond state sanctioned executions and to end the cycle of violence.

In the aftermath of the great event of suffering we witness on Good Friday, we are called to a new way of living. In remembering the suffering of Christ, we choose to respond to the horror and pain of our time by working for something greater. Let us embrace this call to peace, let us allow Good Friday to dangerously move us from violence to mercy.

²³ Johann Baptist Metz, “Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology,” New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2011, p. 89.

²⁴ Ibid., 102.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Bryan Stevenson's work illuminates the power of dangerous memory. Stevenson is the founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, and author of *Just Mercy* (Penguin Random House, 2014). He spawned a public remembrance of our nation's tragic history of lynching in our nation by creating lynching memorials: <http://bit.ly/2y0Lv4d>. What are other examples of dangerous memories throughout our society or salvation history that we need to keep in the forefront of our consciousness in order that they not be repeated?
- How do you, unconsciously or unintentionally, participate in the suffering of others? In what ways does our inaction or lack of memory perpetuate systems of oppression and injustice in our world?
- What are ways that you have, or feel called to "turn over the tables" to draw attention to unjust systems and practices in our country and world?
- What is your personal dangerous memory that compels you to act against injustice? When has that memory of suffering brought to you to resistance and action against an instance of injustice?

FAITH IN ACTION

- Learn more about the impact and power of public memorials. Bryan Stevenson's latest project serves as a way to revisit and give voice to the injustices of our past through lynching site memorials. Watch *Lynching in America-Uprooted*: <http://bit.ly/2ylv5PL>.
- Journey the way of the Cross. Invite the dangerous memory of Christ's crucifixion to awaken you to action. CMN's special death penalty theme, "Stations of the Cross," will give you the opportunity to meditate on the complex and unjust realities of the death penalty while journeying with Christ on his passion: <http://bit.ly/CMNStations>.
- Stand in solidarity with all our sisters and brothers awaiting execution by standing in prayer and vigil. CMN's Vigil for an Execution invites you and your faith community to join in prayer and lift up the need to end the death penalty in light of Christ's own experience of state-sanctioned execution: <http://bit.ly/CMNExecutionVigil>.

PRAYER

Grant me, me, O God, the courage to remember those who suffer. Guide me in the ways of justice and peace so as to respond to injustice. Allow the dangerous memory of Christ on the cross to fill my heart and challenge me to resist our modern day crucifixions. May the memory of Good Friday inspire us as we work to end the cycle of violence in our society. Amen.



Center of
Concern



Christ is Risen!

Easter Sunday
— April 1, 2018 —

Catholic Mobilizing Network

Education for Justice, a project of Center of Concern

Easter Sunday

April 1, 2018

Reflection by
Karen Clifton, M.Div.

+ + +

"Alleluia! This is the day
the LORD has made;
let us rejoice in it
and be glad."

– Psalm 118:24

+ + +

First Reading

Acts 10:34A, 37-43

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 118:1-2, 16-17, 22-23

Second Reading

Colossians 3:1-4

Gospel

Luke 24:13-35

Receive the Good News!

In today's scripture, Peter recounts Christ's life and ministry. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Peter sees that God was, is, and will always be with us. The Lenten journey prepared us for today's experience of Easter, when we experience the joy of the resurrection after the suffering and death of Jesus. Peter finally makes sense of all of the events surrounding Jesus's passion and resurrection. He understands his path forward is to carry Jesus's message of life and salvation to all who will listen.

In this holy recounting of our faith tradition, we recognize that, we too, are God's disciples. Just as we see with the travelers on the road to Emmaus, the resurrection is available to all to fuel our journey. The work before us is to find our way to live out that discipleship.

"This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad" (Psalm 118:1-2).

In the Gospel, the couple walking from Emmaus are caught in the fog of grief after having watched the tragic, senseless killing of Jesus. How could this have happened—especially to someone who was doing such good things? They are caught up in the ageless question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" They are blind either to the will of God or how any good could come of these past events.

After Jesus's death, the apostles and followers of Jesus were huddled together in the upper room, paralyzed and unable to make sense of things. Likewise, the couple walking to Emmaus are walking AWAY from Jerusalem, to escape the possible fall-out and persecution from knowing Jesus. They are trying to escape the grief and shock from the recent days in Jerusalem by heading to Emmaus.



How do we respond to tragedies around us? We see those threatened with deportation moving into the shadows; we see those who have experienced the great harm of rape or abuse become the next generation of abusers; we see those responding to tragedies by losing hope—escaping with drugs, alcohol, sex and other forms of self-destructive behaviors.

The Gospel teaches us that Jesus’s response to tragedy was to accompany. He accompanied the couple in grief on the road to Emmaus. Jesus was present to them and listened. He then tried to give them hope and comfort by going back to their first encounter with God in the scriptures. He brought them along in their journey showing them how God has walked with them and their people throughout history to their present day.

I have had the privilege of accompanying people on retreats, who have experienced homelessness and are addressing their addictions. I have walked with people who have experienced harm and have made bad choices. Being present and listening to them gives them hope and comfort. Like Lent, this retreat is an opportunity for people to go away and focus inward and open themselves to a renewing experience of God. Through the format of facilitated exercises within a circle of people, retreatants are invited to experience freedom and hope by having others being fully present to them. They have been prayed for, continually nurtured, and given a safe space to tell their story. In sharing their story, they are allowed to build community. Through this community they come to a resurrection experience—to see the presence of God within others and most importantly themselves.

“Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way and opened the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32)





In going back and remembering their stories, the retreatants see how God has been walking with them through the tragedies, the hard times and the times they should not have survived. It is in recounting their stories—as Jesus did with the couple on their way to Emmaus and when Peter recounted the ministry of Jesus in Acts—God’s awesome plan is revealed. What an amazing discovery to come to understand that we are wonderfully and intentionally made in God’s image. Despite all of our wrong choices, Jesus chose to die for us.

This is the Good News!

We have been given the gift of salvation from our merciful God who loves us unconditionally. Our God wants to be in relationship with us and walk with us in our confusion, in our pain and celebrate with us during all of the many good times in life. The culmination of the Lenten journey as well as the retreat journey is unconditional love. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16). In seeing and experiencing God’s love through accompaniment, God is revealed and the retreatants experience the resurrection of Christ within themselves.

We are called in our discipleship to carry God’s unconditional love as we accompany others. Allowing the spark of God’s love within us to touch those we encounter, we are able to be present even to those who have done great harm or lived an unproductive life. It has been amazing to see how an experience of God physically changes people. Women who have come down for the retreat, hardened in appearance and mannerisms, begin to relax, smile, and open up. Drivers who have brought women to the retreat have returned and asked while they were looking at their former passengers, “Where are the women I brought down for the retreat?” The women are transformed. Made new!

“Think of what is above, not of what is on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory” (Colossians 5:4).

When Jesus “opened the Scriptures” to the couple on the road to Emmaus and was present to them, their eyes were opened and they recognized him. They experienced *metanoia*. The women on the retreat, through prayer and sharing, opened their eyes to Christ’s presence and received his mercy. Experiencing forgiveness and mercy has the power to transform. This process is recognized during the Easter Vigil. The catechumens are transformed: baptized, dying to self, and rising in Christ—becoming priest, prophet, and king.

Renewed with the reality of the risen Christ, the couple heading to Emmaus set out to return to Jerusalem to the community of believers. They were renewed by the Spirit of Christ to begin the path of discipleship. The women on retreat, having experienced hell on earth with homelessness, abuse, and addictions, rise transformed by unconditional love. They experience resurrection.

Will we look at our old path and turn toward a renewed life? Easter is the beginning of our renewal. It is the energizing force within the year to embolden our discipleship and our ministry of accompaniment. We have all been chosen to be disciples of Christ. This Easter season is the time for us to take the joy of this season and listen to how God wants us to be followers of Christ. Who will we accompany? What are you called to do with the gift of this one wonderful life you have been given?



Christ is Risen!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Looking back at Lent and the Triduum, what was revealed to you about your relationship with God and with your neighbor?
- When have you experienced being loved unconditionally? What were the results of that revelation? What changed? What changed?
- Where is your discipleship calling you during this Easter season? Reflect on what touched you and changed you during this Lenten season? What was your *metanoia*?



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FAITH IN ACTION

- Pray for a continued strengthening of your relationship with God and neighbor over the course of the Easter season.
- Take time to educate yourself about the issues you feel drawn to exercise your discipleship.
- Advocate for the spiritually and physically marginalized in our society. Become the voice for the voiceless and work to stop the cycle of violence both physically and in word in this country.
- Learn how you can deepen and strengthen your relationships with those in your parish. CMN's interactive infographic shows ways that you can bring the practices and principles of restorative justice to your parish. Commit to maintaining right relationship with all those whom you journey with: <http://bit.ly/RJinParish>.

PRAYER

Christ is risen. We give glory to God!

God of all creation, we are grateful for the gift
Of your unconditional love and mercy.

Your presence with us as we walk the journey
Of life is too often taken for granted.

Help us to grow in understanding of your dream and vision
Of what we can be individually and as your chosen people.

Help us to stay on the path to Jerusalem
And to stay focused on being a restorative people, so that all will be one.

As disciples of Christ, give us the grace to be focused
On healing, forgiving, and restoring all to the kingdom of God.

Keep us ever-mindful and attentive to the ways
We cause harm and ready to work for restoration.

We are grateful for the journey of Lent
And the gift of the promised resurrection.
We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen.



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