

***ctkAlive!* Scripture Study**

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time 2020—A Cycle Readings



"Where two or three are gathered in my name. . ." Matthew 18:20
Photo used here courtesy of [Priscilla Du Preez](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Note: For your convenience and to broaden your benefit from this and all sessions in this series, you will find links to books, authors, and other references mentioned in the text.

Caution: Links to the internet are like rabbits dashing across a hunter's path. Instinct says, "Leave the reflection and chase after that link!" Instead, we suggest waiting until you have followed the entire reflection. Then take all the time you wish to follow these interesting and educational links. Exception: In the course of the lesson, you may have an opportunity to watch or listen to a relevant song or video.

Opening Prayer

Note: Many Catholics, for their own valid reasons, make the choice not to attend live outdoor Masses during this time of covid-19. Yet, the absence of being there and receiving the Eucharist, can seem not to satisfy one's desire for the "real thing." Who really understands what "spiritual communion" means? In the following prayer, [Teresa Berger](#), professor of Liturgical Studies at Yale University (visit [Pray Tell Blog](#)), prays to encounter the Risen Christ in "digital" bread and wine.

(edited for use here)

Seeking to encounter the Eucharistic Christ in digital bread and wine

Lord Jesus Christ,
you are the bread of life and the one true vine.
I believe you are truly present
in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist.
I seek you. I worship and adore you.
Since I cannot receive you in the eucharistic bread and wine,
I pray that you will come into my heart and soul,

that I may be united to you, by your all-powerful and ever-present Holy Spirit.
Let me receive you, and be nourished by you.

Become for me the manna in my wilderness,
the bread of angels for my very human journey through time,
a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, and solace in the hour of my death.
I pray all this, trusting that you yourself are our Life, our Peace,
and our everlasting Joy. Amen.

Introduction to the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ezekiel 33: 7-9 “For your part, son of man, I have set you as a watchman for Israel; and when you hear my word, you must give them my warning.”

Jerusalem is on the brink of defeat and capture by the Babylonians. All illusions of the Jews and their false prophets are shattered. Ezekiel understands that Israel has come to the end of the trial. In the future, perhaps remote, there is a glimpse of resurrection.” (Catholic Pastoral Bible footnote, edited)

“The Hebrew expression ‘**son of man**’ (בן-אדם, i.e. ben-'adam) appears 107 times in the Hebrew Bible . . . 93 times in the Book of Ezekiel. . . . As generally interpreted by Jews, ‘son of man’ denotes *mankind generally* in contrast to deity or godhead, with special reference to (humans’) weakness and frailty.”

— [Wikipedia](#)

Psalm 95: 1-2, 6-9 “Do not be stubborn, as at Meribah, in the desert, on that day at Massah, your ancestors challenged me and put me to the test.”

What do “Meribah” and “Massah” stand for in this psalm? These words are first found in the Book of Exodus, Chapter 17. The Israelites quarreled with Moses about the lack of drinking water. In response, Moses struck a rock and water came flowing out. He then rebuked the people for testing Yahweh. In Verse 7, that “watering” place gained the names, Massah, meaning “testing” and Meribah meaning “quarreling.”

Romans 13: 8-10 “Do not be in debt to anyone. Let this be the only debt of one to another: Love.”

In Paul’s world, many people sought in religion an evasion from family tasks and social obligations (2 Thessalonians 3: 6-12). Paul stressed the mystical (“more than meets the eye”) aspect of Christian life. He insisted on civil obedience in the context of daily life within the broad society of the Roman Empire.

Matthew 18: 15-20 “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there, among them.”

Jesus said nothing to his apostles about constructing physical structures for worship, or shrines. He did call for building Spirit-filled communities of believers. These communities mission? To welcome the poor and lowly, to maintain never-

ending forgiveness for sinners, to accept all whom they encountered. Jesus envisioned prayerful communities crying out to God for what they need, both spiritually and physically. There we have the essence of Christian wisdom.

A Reading from the Book of Ezekiel (33: 7-9)

“For your part, son of man, I have set you as a watchman for Israel; and when you hear my word, you must give them my warning. When I say to the wicked: ‘Wicked man, you shall die for sure,’ if you do not warn the wicked man to turn from his ways, he will die because of his sin; but I will also call you to account for his blood. If you warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin; but you, yourself, will be saved.”

Personal Reflection

Reading this passage, composed ca. 2,500 years ago, we wonder how we are expected to hear it and follow its warning. In other words, how might Ezekiel’s teaching play out in my everyday life and relationships?

— *What challenge do I face today, related to saying something to a person about behavior that I deem risky or even morally wrong? What do I want to say? How do I want to say it? What would Jesus do in this situation. What would Jesus expect me to do?*

— *How open am I to being “spoken to” by a family member, boss, or friend regarding my current behavior and/or my direction in life?*

Antiphon: Psalm 95 (1-2, 6-9)

A call to praise and worship: a processional hymn

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Sing to Yahweh a new song,
sing to Yahweh, all the earth!
Sing to Yahweh, praise his name;
proclaim his salvation, day after day.

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Come and worship; let us bow down,
kneel before Yahweh, our Maker.

He is our God, and we, his people;
the flock he leads and pastures.
Would, that today, you heard his voice!

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts

Do not be stubborn, as at Meribah,
in the desert, on that day at Massah,
when your ancestors challenged me,
and put me to the test.

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts

Personal Reflection

The responsorial verse, contains the tiny, two-letter zinger, “**if**.” This conditional preposition packs a wallop. “If” means we cannot take for granted that all people, including ourselves, will “hear his voice” and not “harden” their (our) hearts.

— *As I examine my own “hearing his voice” today, how do I assess the quality of my personal faith and practice? Is there a place where I draw the line beyond which I will not go in my service of my Lord Jesus?*

If my answer is an honest, “Yes, I have drawn a line in the sand, beyond which I will say to God, ‘Sorry, Lord, but I can go no further’? Where is my line? How do I feel about that? What resolution am I prepared to commit to today?

Second Reading: From St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans (13: 8-10)

“Do not be in debt to anyone. Let this be the only debt of one to another: **Love**. The one who loves his or her neighbor fulfills the law. For the commandments: Do not commit adultery, do not kill, do not covet, and whatever else, are summarized in this one: You will love your neighbor as yourself. Love cannot do the neighbor any harm; so love fulfills the whole law.”

Personal Reflection

To us, living in a first-world society, hearing the words, “Do not be in debt to anyone,” seems naïve. Most of us are accustomed spending our adult lives in debt to someone or some institution (e.g., bank, education loans, car payments, et. al.)

— *How can I apply St. Paul’s advice about indebtedness in a way that makes sense in my real, everyday life?*

In Paul's mind, the only debt that matters is the quality of my LOVE.

— *What is the quality of my "love life," in the **broadest** meaning of that term? Which of my many "loves" needs improvement, deeper commitment, and self-giving? How willing am I to risk loving in greater depth—today?*

— *What are my greatest obstacles to loving unconditionally? What am I willing to do today to love without placing conditions on my love ("if only _____, then")?*

Proclamation from the Gospel according to Matthew (18: 15-20)

"If your brother has sinned against you, go and point out the fault to him, when the two of you are alone; and if he listens to you, you have won back your brother. If he doesn't listen to you, take with you one or two others, so that the case may be decided by the evidence of two or three witnesses. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the assembled church. But if he does not listen to the church, then regard him as a pagan, or a tax collector. I say to you: whatever you bind on earth, heaven will keep bound; and whatever you unbind on earth, heaven will keep unbound. In like manner, I say to you, if, on earth, two of you agree in asking for anything, it will be granted to you by my heavenly Father; for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there, among them."

Personal Reflection

Watch and Listen—"[Where Two or Three are Gathered](#)" a song/hymn by Irish priest, [Liam Lawton](#)

"I say to you, if, on earth, two of you agree in asking for anything, it will be granted to you by my heavenly Father; for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there, among them." The context for this passage is Matthew's advice to fellow Christians of the mid-first century AD/CE, *among* whom and *for* whom he wrote. It still rings true today.

— *How do these words apply to me in this time of shelter-in-place?*

— *What hints in the gospel text indicate who Matthew's audience was?*

Note: Verses 15-17 of this gospel are difficult for us to get a grip on. Over the centuries, Christians have used—and often misused—Jesus' words to bolster a particular (mostly negative) point of view. For further guidance on this, we refer you to a [commentary](#) from the [Catholic Exchange](#) website.

Shelter-in-Place

My school-age children may be settling into school, either virtually or in person.

— *What moral support and encouragement am I offering them? Do they accept my advice? Or have I decided to let them learn from experience?*

— *What decisions have I made about exposing my grade- and middle-school children to in-person education. How are these decisions affecting the students, our whole family—and me?*

Presidential and other political campaigns, including local, are in full gear. Given that no candidate for any office, from president down to city council candidates, is a living saint, our political choices call for thoughtful discernment.

— *How open am I to weighing the pros and cons of each candidate I vote for, or do I simply vote along party lines?*

— *Since voting is a sacred act and privilege (not given to all citizens of the world), what spiritual discernment process do I use in throwing my support to candidates?*

— *If I am a “single issue” voter, what is that issue? How prepared am I to look at the bigger picture and weigh all the pros and cons of each candidate and ballot measures?*

Write about your feelings and your lived experience of these issues during your journaling time (below).

Journaling Prompts

What insights have I gained from reflecting on the readings for the 23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time in light of my current social demands and restrictions. Suggested prompt:

— *After reflecting on the readings, what made the deepest impression on me?*

We mustn't simply be grateful “recipients” of God's good gifts. We need to be “givers,” too.

— *How will this week's Scriptures and current societal events impact the way I think, live, love—and “give back”—during the week ahead?*

For Inspirational Viewing / Listening

See the reflection on the Gospel for a recording of Fr. Liam Lawton, singing “Where Two or Three are Gathered.”

Preview of Next Session

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Book of Sirach (27:30 to 28:7) “Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight.”

Psalms 103 (1-4, 9-12) “Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all my being, bless his holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.”

Romans 14: 7-9 “None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself. For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord.”

Matthew 18: 21-35 “Peter approached Jesus and asked him, ‘Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive? As many as seven times?’”

Closing Prayer

Source: [Catholic Relief Services](#)

(edited and abridged for use here)

All Creation Sings Your Praise

Father, Creator of all,
thank you for these late summer days,
for the warmth of the sun,
the hours of daylight
and the beauty around me.

Thank you for the ability to revel in the beauty of your creation,
and for time to share it with family and friends.
May the somewhat slower pace of this time
allow me to see you more vividly in the world around me
and draw me closer to you as we approach the end of summer.

Teach me how to pray with wonder
and awe at the world around me,

no matter where I am or what I am doing.
Warm my soul with the continued gift of your presence
and guide my feet with the light of your love.
As I stand surrounded by your creation,
create in me a pure heart, O Lord! Amen

Questions?

Send any questions or comments you might have to algarrotto@comcast.net

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