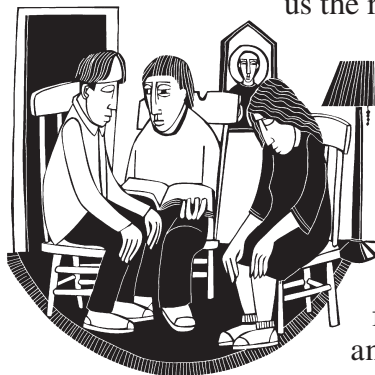


A Repentant Community of Love

Ezekiel 33:7–9
Psalm 95:1–2, 6–7, 8–9
Romans 13:8–10
Matthew 18:15–20

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

When have you had to be accountable for something in your life? When you are accountable for something, not only does the success of the project belong to do, but any shortfalls or oversights are also placed on your shoulders. It is especially difficult when your accountability extends to the actions of others. The readings this week speak to us about accountability that extends far beyond the scope of our own actions. In the First Reading, Ezekiel is given no small task when told that he is responsible for turning the people of Israel away from their evil ways. He must make every effort to convince the people to change their ways. Imagine being evaluated on such an enormous task! Paul's message is very much the same when he tells the Romans to love one another (13:8). Loving someone means taking responsibility for that person and keeping him or her safe. When we love someone, we are accountable to that person. In the reading from the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus teaches



us the role of the community in holding people accountable for reconciling with others. God clearly wants us to know that we have a responsibility to the others around us. Our words, actions, attitudes, and efforts communicate our care and concern for one another. When upset occurs in our relationships or community, we all are responsible for bringing about reconciliation and forgiveness.

SHARING FAITH

- ◆ How do the members of your family reconcile with one another? Do you follow all of the steps that Jesus recommends in this Sunday's Gospel?
- ◆ Think of a time when you needed forgiveness from another. Did receiving the sacrament of Penance figure into your process of gaining forgiveness? Why or why not?
- ◆ How do you hold yourself accountable to the communities to which you belong? How can you participate more fully in these communities?

LIVING THE LITURGY

- ◆ We often communicate our attitudes through body language. Play a game of charades, and invite each member of your family or group to model the body language of a particular attitude or mood. Talk about the ways in which we demonstrate care for one another through our body language.
- ◆ Revisit the sacrament of Penance. See if your parish has some materials you can borrow to learn more about it.
- ◆ Make a family chain of accountability. Invite each person in your family to write down his or her name on a slip of construction paper. Then, have each person think of a household chore or task that he or she is responsible for, and write that down on another strip. Make loops to fasten the two strips together. Then, have each person write down the names of all of the people who count on him or her, and fasten those to the chain, too.

Forgiveness Endures

Sirach 27:30—28:9

Psalm 103:1–2, 3–4, 9–10, 11–12

Romans 14:7–9

Matthew 18:21–35

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

This Sunday's readings remind us that we are all sinners in need of forgiveness. We hear this message in the reading from Sirach, which reminds us that we are all sinners in need of forgiveness and that we are called to forgive others in the hope that we, too, might be forgiven.

In the Gospel, we see this demonstrated firsthand when Peter asks Jesus how many times he ought to forgive someone. Peter thinks that he is being generous when he forgives a member of Christ's household seven times. After all, Jewish custom only required him to forgive three times. He thought he was going above and beyond. But Jesus challenges him to see forgiveness in a whole new light. Jesus tells him to forgive seventy-seven times or seventy times seven times. Either number communicates a limitless reality to forgiveness. To get his point across, Jesus recounts the parable of the unforgiving servant. The key to the parable is the huge discrepancy in the amount owed by the two servants. The king (God) forgave an unbelievably large debt on the part of his household servant.



The same servant (us) was unwilling to forgive the smallest of debts on the part of his fellow servant. The moral of the parable centers on the need of the community to act with God-like compassion toward all. This pattern of acting is the basis for all relationships within Christ's community. It moves every person to forgive others from the heart, as God has forgiven us.

SHARING FAITH

- ◆ Is there anyone who you have forgiven time and time again? Do you ever resent having to forgive so much? How do these Sunday's readings change your feelings of resentment?
- ◆ When have you been forgiven beyond your every expectation? How did it feel?
- ◆ Peter thought that Jesus would commend him for his generosity, and instead Jesus told him that he wasn't doing enough. Have you ever had a moment like this in your faith, when it turned out that your version of virtue wasn't matching God's? What happened? How did it make you feel?

LIVING THE LITURGY

- ◆ Try to use the word *forgive* seventy-seven times this week. Keep a tally of how many times you've used it on a small piece of scrap paper in your purse or wallet.
- ◆ Write a passage about forgiveness from this Sunday's First Reading or Gospel on an index card and carry it with you throughout the week. Whenever you start beating up on yourself for something you have done or failed to do, read the card and remind yourself of God's all-forgiving love.
- ◆ Enter into a potentially charged situation this week intending only to bring a spirit of love and forgiveness. See how your attitude can change the course of everyone's conversation and experience.

God's Generosity

Isaiah 55:6–9
Psalm 145:2–3, 8–9, 17–18
Philippians 1:20c–24, 27a
Matthew 20:1–16a

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

This Sunday, Isaiah, in three short verses, warns us that we might be in for a surprise, and the parable of the laborers in the vineyard from the Gospel according to Matthew is very surprising! In the parable, it would not have been difficult for the landowner to calculate the exact hours each person worked and pay the wages accordingly. In fact, that process would have saved the landowner money! So what is the problem? The landowner pays all of the workers the same wage regardless of when they had started working during the day. The workers hired early did not agree with the landowner's generosity toward the workers who were hired later in the day. Instead of admiring the landowner's generosity, they fall victim to envy.

Paul's message ends with a warning for the people of the early Christian community. Paul clearly intends his warning to apply to situations that contradict common cultural practices, and have the best interests of our brothers and sisters at heart.



You probably do not have to look far or think too hard to remember a situation in which envy dictated your actions. Perhaps when you find yourself in such situations, you might try looking at things from a Gospel point of view. Let God lead you into becoming a person of generosity who goes beyond society's expectations of fairness.

SHARING FAITH

- ◆ Talk to a friend or to your faith sharing group about a time when you experienced God's generosity. What happened? How did you respond? Did anyone respond with jealousy like the workers in this Sunday's parable?
- ◆ How would the workers' attitudes have to change in order for everyone to see the landowner as generous beyond expectations? What helps you to change your envy into gratitude?
- ◆ When you encounter others who are experiencing envy, what can you do or say to help the other person see things from another perspective?

LIVING THE LITURGY

- ◆ As a family, read Matthew 20:1–6a. Take turns telling how you would react to the landowner's generosity if you were one of the workers hired at the beginning of the day. Then do the exercise again, this time imagining that you were the last worker to be hired.
- ◆ Look in magazines or newspapers for stories about people who need our generosity. Post these stories in a prominent spot in your home or parish as a reminder that we are called to be generous beyond all expectations with one another.
- ◆ Make an individual plan for showing generosity to other members of your family. Write down your plan and keep it as a reminder to live this Gospel value.

Faithful, Obedient Followers of Christ

Ezekiel 18:24–28
Psalm 25:4–5, 6–7, 8–9
Philemon 2:1–11 or 2:1–5
Matthew 21:28–32

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

Have you ever seen a movie or read a book with a plot somewhat like the following? Two people both decide that the other has a better life situation, they magically switch places, and they quickly learn the downsides of the other person’s life and begin to see new value in their own. The people switching lives come in all sorts of varieties—a family man might switch lives with a bachelor, or a poor person might switch lives with a rich one—but the message is always the same: we never really know what it is like to be in another person’s situation until we experience it for ourselves.

This week’s readings teach us to put ourselves in other people’s shoes and be empathetic. Paul asks hearers to put themselves in the shoes of others and become concerned about their interests. The essence of Paul’s message is his invitation to enter the mind of Jesus, who was like us in all things but sin. The parable from the Gospel according to Matthew sends the same invitation. Jesus

compares two brothers: one who first refused to do the work his father asked of him but later did it, and another who verbally accepted their father’s request but never followed through with his commitment to perform the work. Jesus asked which of the two did what their father wanted (21:31). We, too, are left to ponder that it is the son who followed through with action who will enter into the kingdom of God.



SHARING FAITH

- ◆ In Paul’s letters, the phrase “in Christ” is used more than 150 times. What are the characteristics of someone who lives in Christ?
- ◆ With whom would you most like to trade places? Why? What seems appealing about that person’s life? Do you think that person would find anything appealing about your life?
- ◆ Are there any areas of your life in which you aren’t as involved as you could be? How does your lack of presence or participation affect others? How might you change?

LIVING THE LITURGY

- ◆ This week, focus on entering fully into every aspect of your life. Spend time with your family. Engage yourself fully in projects at work or school. How does engaging with your community change your life?
- ◆ Mother Teresa is a modern-day example of someone who entered into the lives of others. Do some research on her this week, focusing on how she is remembered by those whose lives she touched. How would you like to be remembered by people?
- ◆ Rent the movie “Freaky Friday” this week and watch it with your family or some friends. After the movie, talk about the characters of the mother and daughter. What assumptions did each make about the other’s life? If you could change bodies with someone, who would it be? What do you think you would learn from the experience? What do you think they would learn?

Workers in the Lord's Vineyard

Isaiah 5:1–7

Psalm 80:9, 12, 13–14, 15–16, 19–20

Philippians 4:6–9

Matthew 21:33–43

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

We have all had those days when nothing goes as planned. It is especially distressing when this happens during a big celebration or special occasion. We do everything right, arrange every last detail, and still things do not turn out as we expect.

In two of the three readings this week, despite the farmer's best efforts and care, the vineyard produces bitter fruit. On the surface, we can apply this scenario to many things that happen in our lives. But the vineyard is also a symbol of conversion in our own lives. Just as growth is in the vineyard, conversion is almost always a process rather than a solitary life-changing event. It takes work and someone to get things going and nurture growth along the way. For some of us, the ground has been well prepared, and for others it has not. Despite the care of the vineyard, good fruit is not guaranteed. Like the laborers in the vineyard, we have the free choice to produce good fruit to the delight of God or bad fruit whereby we can imagine him asking, "What went wrong?"

Most often, conversion is a long, tedious process that calls for constant nurturing. Paul understood the challenges facing the early Christians and worked hard to keep them focused. The passage from his letter to the Philippians provides the encouragement we need to keep focused on turning our lives toward God and producing good fruit in his vineyard.



SHARING FAITH

- ◆ Talk with your family or a group of friends about the caregivers in your lives. Look beyond the obvious to identify people like doctors, those who clean up your neighborhood, your car mechanic, the people who grow and safely ship your food, and so on. How can you be more grateful for these people?
- ◆ What encourages and motivates you most to do your best? Do some vines in the vineyard need different things to grow than others? How can we be sensitive to these differences?
- ◆ The vineyard was a cherished possession. What possessions do you cherish or protect? How do these possessions help you to produce good fruit for God?

LIVING THE LITURGY

- ◆ Philippians 4:6–9 is a beautiful passage of encouragement. Read it with your family or a group of friends. Throughout the week, pay close attention to your friends and family members and find ways to encourage them.
- ◆ Share stories about a time when things did not go the way you planned. Discuss with one another what could have helped change the outcome.
- ◆ Discuss a current issue that is being debated in local, state, or national government. Compose an e-mail or letter to a government official encouraging him or her to vote in a way that benefits the least of our brothers and sisters.

The Lord Invites Us to His Banquet

Isaiah 25:6–10a

Psalm 23:1–3a, 3b–4, 5, 6

Philippians 4:12–14, 19–20

Matthew 22:1–14 or 22:1–10

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

Parties and banquets are events we anticipate. Whether we realize it or not, invitations also come with a lot of responsibility. Our host sets the parameters for the event, so we can plan how we will dress and what we need to bring.

The First Reading and the reading from the Gospel this week are easy to relate to our own lives and times. From these readings, we learn that we are invited to be part of God’s heavenly banquet. We can choose to accept his invitation and we are prepared to participate in the banquet that he sets. A subtler message of the readings, however, has us look closely at who really accepts God’s invitation and comes prepared to celebrate at his banquet. Some seem worthy of the banquet, while others make excuses or blatantly refuse the invitation. With a feast ready and no one to celebrate, both those who were doing bad and good were invited. All but one of these unexpected guests came prepared for the occasion. The insulted host showed no mercy to the one guest who came improperly dressed, but the party giver welcomed those who came prepared despite the little notice they had.



We are all invited to God’s heavenly banquet, but we must be ready. Paul’s message directs our preparation to the words and actions of Jesus. It is never too soon to carefully consider the invitation, clothe ourselves in Christ, and prepare for the eternal banquet.

SHARING FAITH

- ◆ How well are you wearing your baptismal garment? What actions have stained it? How can you clean the stains?
- ◆ Some of the invited guests offer excuses about why they cannot be there. What excuses do you use for not doing God’s will? How can you stop making excuses and move into action?
- ◆ Psalm 23 offers words of comfort. Read through it and talk about how these words comfort you. When do you most need comfort? How does God provide it?

LIVING THE LITURGY

- ◆ Invite younger members of your family to help set the table for dinner. Make an ordinary dinner into a banquet celebration of God’s love by adding flowers and candles on the table.
- ◆ Plan to invite someone to your house who you have not seen in a while. Take time to reconnect with that person over a meal.
- ◆ Compile a list of types of parties and banquets that you attend. Discuss the expectations that come with each invitation and the expected behavior and attire at each event. Which invitations help you to live better as a disciple of Christ? Are there any that lead you away from Christ?

Give God His Due

Isaiah 45:1, 4–6
Psalm 96:1, 3, 4–5, 7–8, 9–10
1 Thessalonians 1:1–5b
Matthew 22:15–21

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

Believe it or not, in a month or so the secular holiday season will already be in full swing. No doubt, you will be receiving Christmas cards in the mail at this time. Whose cards do you look forward to receiving the most? Often, the best cards are the ones that come with updated information on old friends or family.

Paul and his peers knew that they needed to keep in touch with the small Christian communities that they couldn't visit frequently. The success of the early church depended on the strength of the bonds that early Christian leaders maintained with one another even though they were divided by distance and culture. Even though communication has greatly improved since Paul's time, forming and maintaining strong bonds still takes work that comes from faith in the relationship, the love of others, and hope that they will respond to our efforts.

In the Old Testament, the bond the people form with the Lord is the foundation for our faith. Isaiah uses very strong language to tell us about our deep and powerful bond with the Lord, who calls each of us by name. Like any earthly bond, we must nurture our relationship with God, too.

Jesus shows this to the Pharisees in this story from Matthew. When the Pharisees test Jesus' allegiance between Caesar and God, Jesus reminds them that true bonding is not in earthly things but comes from God and leads us to an everlasting relationship with him.



SHARING FAITH

- ◆ What are the strongest bonds of friendship or family in your life? Do these bonds help you to grow closer to God? Have they ever prevented you from growing closer to God?
- ◆ What bond exists between Christian leaders and the community today? How can we strengthen this bond?
- ◆ How is bonding with others part of our Christian faith?

LIVING THE LITURGY

- ◆ Take time this week to write a letter to someone who you haven't reached out to in a while. Update the person with all of your news, and inquire after his or her life.
- ◆ Discuss the principles that help to maintain the bond in your family or your small Christian community. Assign symbols to some of these values and create a family or community crest that illustrates the principles that keep you bonded together. Put the completed crest in a visible spot so that you can refer back to it often.
- ◆ Decide how you can strengthen your bond with the clergy of your faith community. Perhaps you might invite a priest or deacon to share dinner with your family or your small Christian community.

Two Commandments of Love

Exodus 22:20–26
Psalm 18:2–3, 3–4, 47, 51
1 Thessalonians 1:5c–10
Matthew 22:34–40

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

Each of us can think of a time when we really felt that we were heard. A great sense of peace comes with really being heard and understood. Hearing requires effort on the part of the listener, as well as compassion for the speaker's life situation.

The readings this week explore hearing from a variety of perspectives. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul presents the people as stellar examples of listening to God. Their turning away from sin shows that they heard and followed his word. The Exodus reading begins by giving laws to hear and obey. With these laws come the assurances that God hears each of us, especially the weak and unprotected, and gives us comfort in our distress. In the reading from the Gospel, Jesus asks us to hear two basic commandments—love of God and love of neighbor as oneself.

Hearing takes strength of character. The message is not always what we want to hear and often changes us in unexpected ways. To fully love God and our neighbor, we may have to change our attitudes and preferences. We can find strength in the example of the Thessalonians to hear and respond to Jesus' message and example of love.



SHARING FAITH

- ◆ Who are the weak or marginalized in our society? How do we listen and respond to their needs?
- ◆ What does God hear from you? When and where do you find it easiest to talk to God? How do you listen to God?
- ◆ How does hearing Jesus' message of love call us to change our lives?

LIVING THE LITURGY

- ◆ This week, have each family member select a song to play during dinner, or invite the members of your faith sharing group to bring favorite CDs with them to play during your meeting. Listen to each song carefully, and invite the person who selected it to explain why it was chosen. As you talk about the music, focus consciously on really listening to everyone and asking questions to draw out one another's opinions.
- ◆ Discuss the qualities that make someone a good listener and make a list of them. Plan to listen to others actively this week using the skills you have identified. At the end of the week, talk about what you learned from listening.
- ◆ Take time to talk this week with someone whose viewpoints differ from your own. Rather than skirting your difference of belief, invite the person to tell you about his or her views. Listen openly and carefully. Then, take time to explain your own views. When you are finished, tell the person what you learned and ask what he or she learned.

The Greatest Shall Be a Servant

Malachi 1:14b—2:2b, 8–10

Psalm 131:1, 2, 3

1 Thessalonians 2:7b–9, 13

Matthew 23:1–12

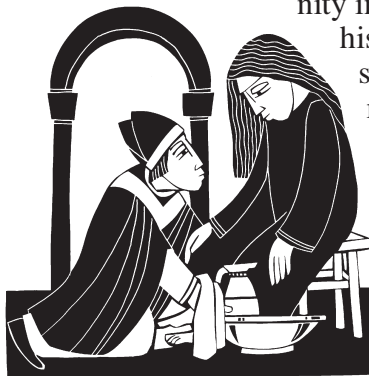
SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

Today's readings remind us how easy it is for pious people to become the center of their own religion. In the First Reading, we hear the prophet Malachi's scathing critique of the practice of the priests. They have not only sullied the dignity of their office, but have caused others to falter. .

In the Gospel, Jesus addresses the scribes and Pharisees with a similar accusation. Jesus chides the leaders for overburdening the faithful and doing nothing to help them. He calls attention to the fact that they used their religious dress to attract special recognition, and then warns his disciples against the use of self-aggrandizing titles. He is not telling them to hide their commitment or to avoid teaching or leadership. Rather, he is telling them that they should not impose their authority or use labels that stratify the community.

The kind of leadership that Jesus calls for in the Gospel is brought to life in the actions of Paul and the early Christian community in the Second Reading. Paul describes

his ministry to the Thessalonians as similar to the self-offering of a nursing mother. Paul reminds his companions that they are not just to share the Gospel, but their very selves. Today's readings are a reminder that the attention people receive for their worthy actions can quickly turn them from service to stardom. They forget how to give glory to the name of God.



SHARING FAITH

- ◆ Can you think of any leaders who are like the priests in the First Reading or the Pharisees and scribes in the Gospel? What are the fruits of this kind of leadership?
- ◆ Do you know any leaders who act like Paul and his companions in the Second Reading? What are the fruits of this kind of leadership?
- ◆ Have you ever been tempted to focus on your own glory rather than the good of others when performing a charitable action? At what point does it become wrong to accept thanks or praise for your good works?

LIVING THE LITURGY

- ◆ There are many interactions between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees in the Gospel. Go through the four accounts to find these stories. What kinds of things do the scribes and Pharisees seem to care about? How does Jesus set them straight? Who are the scribes and Pharisees in our world today? How do you think they would react to Jesus if he appeared in their midst?
- ◆ Take an extended walk or jog around your neighborhood this week. When you start to get tired and want to go home, challenge yourself to keep going for another three or four blocks. Reflect on how service of others, like exercise, becomes more natural the more you do it.
- ◆ Service opportunities abound at this time of year. Decide on one thing that you will do, and follow through!

Guidelines for Life

Revelation 7:2–4, 9–14
Psalm 24:1–2, 3–4, 5–6
1 John 3:1–3
Matthew 5:1–12a

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

We all should be required to write 100 times per day the words from John's first letter: "Beloved, we are God's children now" (3:2). Perhaps after many years we might start to believe the message! We are beloved people of God, loved before we were born and loved even when we sin and turn away from God. God constantly hopes we will see the way to follow him through his Son, Jesus, and eagerly waits for us to act as brothers and sisters who love one another because we are all his cherished children.

Jesus proclaimed what God's reign would be like if we acted as children of God. To help his disciples know how to act, he teaches them the Beatitudes, the guidelines for living the life God intends us to live. Jesus believed, trusted, and expected that his followers would live by the words of his Sermon on the Mount.

Over centuries, many men and women have lived as unique witnesses to the kingdom of God. The Catholic Church has officially



recognized or canonized them as saints. These saints showed us we are called to act as brothers and sisters of Christ. Many were martyrs who gave their lives for the sake of the Gospel. We, too, are called to holiness and their example helps lead us in our sacred journey.

SHARING FAITH

- ◆ Saints were holy people. Yet we often have a limited sense of what it means to be holy. How would you describe holy living according to the Beatitudes?
- ◆ Which Beatitude is the hardest for you to follow? Why?
- ◆ What saints have influenced your life? Consider your patron saint and the patron saints of family members and friends, and of your present and former churches and schools.

LIVING THE LITURGY

- ◆ Create a reflective booklet or poster, either electronically or with craft supplies, making a page or section for each Beatitude. Use words, images, drawings, or headlines to depict each of the Beatitudes. Do the project as a group or individually and then share your ideas with others. Reflect on it during the year.
- ◆ Read about a saint who is interesting or important to you online. A good Web site is www.catholic.org/saints. How did this saint live a life witnessing to Christ and attending to the needs of God's people? What can you learn from his or her example?
- ◆ Pray a litany of saints or listen to one that has been set to music (check your church's hymnal). What names are familiar? What saints do you know nothing about? What modern-day holy men and women are also examples of holy living for you?

Longing for the Living God

Wisdom 6:12–16

Psalm 63:2, 3–4, 5–6, 7–8

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 or 4:13–14

Matthew 25:1–13

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

Today's readings speak to our inherent need to seek the presence of God. The First Reading personifies divine Wisdom. The passage not only promises that Wisdom can be found by those who seek her, but that she actually goes out in search of those who love her. Psalm 63 compares the longing for God with physical thirst—the most fundamental need of living creatures. In the Gospel, Matthew describes the kingdom of God with the parable of the ten bridesmaids awaiting the bridegroom whose arrival, while later than expected, is assured.

We do not just wait passively for the arrival of the kingdom, though. We are to live our lives as those who long for and love the kingdom. This Sunday's readings describe how we are to wait even in our passive moments. In the First Reading, we are told that Wisdom comes to those who demonstrate their love for her by watching at dawn, thinking of her, and keeping vigil. And, of course, that

is just what the wise bridesmaids do in this Sunday's Gospel. They prepare themselves for a long time of keeping vigil so that the arrival of the bridegroom, however late it may be, will be joyful and bright.

Take these readings into your heart as you prepare for the time of Advent, when we keep the lamps burning bright as we await the coming of Christ our Light into the world.



SHARING FAITH

- ◆ Today's readings describe the quieter side of faithful living. How often do you take time for silent contemplation or meditation in your life?
- ◆ How can you fill this Advent with a contemplative mood, rather than giving in to the secular Christmas rush?
- ◆ The bridesmaids in today's Gospel ignore the panic of their companions because they know that they need to stay focused on the bridegroom. With so much need in the world and so many people clamoring for help, is there a point at which it is okay to say no? How do you identify that point?

LIVING THE LITURGY

- ◆ Make a contemplative space at home with a candle and a Bible. Model using this space yourself, and mention that it is available to your family members.
- ◆ With your family or faith sharing group, talk about the expectations of a bridesmaid. How are these responsibilities similar to the responsibilities of the Christian awaiting the kingdom?
- ◆ With your family or faith sharing group, get out markers and paper and have each person draw a symbol or write a parable of the kingdom of God. When you are finished, share your work with one another. How do you envision the kingdom differently? What different aspects of the kingdom were brought out in different people's work?

Servants Awaiting Their Master's Return

Proverbs 31:10–13, 19–20, 30–31

Psalm 128:1–2, 3, 4–5

1 Thessalonians 5:1–6

Matthew 25:14–30 or 25:14–15, 19–21

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

In everything that we do, we are encouraged to excel. For most of us, surpassing or achieving high standards takes effort and involves risks. In some cases, we choose to take an easier path and, in doing so, don't get the satisfaction of knowing we gave our all.

The readings this week spotlight people who, through vigilance, went beyond the requirements of the job to excel. Proverbs tells us about a wife who, despite a heavy load of domestic chores, went beyond the call of duty to serve others in her community. In Jesus' parable, the man with one talent did nothing wrong because it was the custom of the day to bury money. He was not vigilant, however. The master was gone for a lengthy time, requiring his servants to be mindful of how they took care of their talents. Paul also emphasizes the quality of vigilance to his communities who are discouraged that Jesus has not yet returned.

This week's readings compel us to look at our lives for sins of omission. We are asked to find talents in us that we have buried and

must now uncover so that profit can be made. Uncovering our talents might mean we clear away unimportant tasks and, like the woman in Proverbs, get to the heart of the tasks that have the most impact on the people around us. Ultimately, God calls us to turn to him and be patient while we await the glorious return of his Son. During this time, we are to put our talents to good use.



SHARING FAITH

- ◆ Where are your best efforts directed? What areas could use more work?
- ◆ If you could be awarded a “lifetime achievement award,” what award would you choose and why?
- ◆ What talents or possessions do you have that you would not want to share with others? Why would you not want to share them? Choose one of these talents or possessions and try to share it.

LIVING THE LITURGY

- ◆ This liturgical year is drawing to a close. Recall the readings from the past few weeks and make a list of the messages from the Gospel that speak to your everyday life.
- ◆ As Advent approaches, begin to brainstorm ways in which you can help others in your community turn their focus to preparing to celebrate Christ's coming. Begin to watch for opportunities to serve others or help with a project in your faith community.
- ◆ Play a board game that involves making a profit, like Monopoly. After the game, discuss the strategies and skills that you used in order to gain the most profit. Decide how you can use the same strategies in living out your faith.

Carrying on the Mission of the Shepherd-King

Ezekiel 34:11–12, 15–17
Psalm 23:1–2, 2–3, 5–6
1 Corinthians 15:20–26, 28
Matthew 25:31–46

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

Most of us might not realize the responsibilities that came with the job of a shepherd, but this once-important position is key to understanding many Biblical passages and Jesus' identity as Shepherd-King. In Jesus' day, the shepherd had the awesome responsibility of protecting a highly valued animal. No fences or convenient ways existed to bring massive amounts of food to a large herd. Without the shepherd, the animals were easy prey to wild beasts and were often lost to the expanse of the land. Shepherds were not casual overseers but were constantly on guard over their flocks.

The passages this week rely on an understanding of the shepherd's duties. In Ezekiel we find a shepherd who has not done his job, thereby putting the flock in danger. A new shepherd—the Lord—comes to save the abandoned herd. In light of the New Testament and their faith, Christians understand this shepherd as the Lord Jesus. Parallel to Ezekiel's scenario, Matthew tells about a shepherd who comes to sort the good from the bad while rescuing the weakest members of the flock. Because the weak animals of the flock are overlooked to protect the majority, Jesus surprises his audience by delegating responsibility for them and clearly defining their tasks for them. His words are the basis for what Catholics have traditionally called the corporal works of mercy.



SHARING FAITH

- ◆ What traits do you associate with the title of “shepherd”? Where do these ideas about shepherds come from? What images from today's world might be used to describe Jesus' unique style of leadership?
- ◆ What skills and personal qualities did shepherds have in Jesus' time? Why do you think Jesus chose to identify himself with a shepherd?
- ◆ What prevents you from seeing God in all people?

LIVING THE LITURGY

- ◆ Many find guiding principles for life in this passage from Matthew's account of the Gospel. Look out for the citation of this Sunday's Gospel on license plates and t-shirts. Think about why this particular passage might speak to people.
- ◆ Make a crown for the center of your table. Decorate it with symbols or words that tell about the qualities of Christ the King. Leave the crown in place until next Sunday, when Advent begins.
- ◆ Look at a hidden picture book or puzzle. After finding some of the missing objects, decide what makes the things you are looking for so hard to find. Discuss strategies for the rest of your search. Talk about how we miss seeing the presence of Christ the King in our families, neighborhood, and world.