

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Aug 18th 2017

Today's liturgical readings, at first reflection do not seem to have a great deal of thought continuity.

The first text from Exodus is a kind of litany of God's great deeds, designed to stir up the gratitude of the Israelites for God's fidelity. The Gospel text, taken from Matthew is the famous passage about the impossibility of divorce based on the argument that a couple who rightly choose one another bond into one flesh that cannot be divided by human decision.

In praying with these texts I was moved by the fidelity of God that emerges in the assertions of each.

The passage from Exodus is very like a litany of faithfulness. Down through the centuries God has continually brought His people to a better place or situation. God has fulfilled our deepest needs. The call to us, is for an answering fidelity to the people and to God. We are called to live and work and love within community, not alone.

Joshua calls the people together at God's command and calls out this litany to inspire a response of gratitude within the people. Gratitude is the first and most important step in really loving someone. When we are confident that we don't need anyone else then we do not give ourselves away in love.

One of the great blessings of modernity has been the recognition of the rights and dignity of each and every human person, but at the same time one of the great curses of modernity has been to so highlight the individuality of each person that we forget we are communal creatures. We are conceived by a community of two; we survive, and more importantly thrive, when we dwell in a community of care and support. Without community connections, we cease to be human.

A number of years ago I came to a retreat center for some days of prayer. When I arrived I was exhausted and frazzled by the difficulties of a new ministry position I had taken on several months before. My director recommended that I first spend some time physically resting and begin slowly with prayer, so early the second morning, I was looking on a wonderfully beautiful world of new-fallen snow with ice crystals in the trees, and asking myself "what was I doing here?" when I had so much work to do at my new position. Suddenly, in my heart I heard a voice say, "Yes, what are you doing here?"

Startled, I stopped and said "I don't know . . . I have all this work to do, and I am sitting around trying to pray and I can't even do that."

The heart voice said "Tell me how you got here . . .". The voice was not asking what mode of transportation I had used or what map I had followed, but what heart map had brought me to this moment of my life. I was drawn into remembering my own story in a prayer litany similar to Joshua's. A memory list of ways and times, of how God had gathered my ancestors together at various moments of history to form family, until my parents met and married, brought me into a family of four older siblings, led me from the high plains of Wyoming to various places for school, and work – each time intervening to bring wonderful support and love into my life.

As the prayer continued I realized a rush of gratitude rising in my heart – a heart so grateful that I wanted, more than anything, to give back – to share my gifts. That is what Joshua is trying to evoke in today's reading from us, the "people of God." God has brought each of us from our own experience of the "land of Egypt" and given us a name and a hand up to support us, an escape path when we feel

“under water,” a light to lead us and a cloud to occasionally hide us from enemies . . . if we could only look closely at our lives and see all the ways each day that God rescues us and calls us to relationships of care and love, we could not be afraid of being faithful in return.

My experience of prayer so many years ago remains a “touchstone” of consolation that I periodically remember, especially in difficult times, in days when God feels far away.

St. Ignatius tells us that it is important that we remember such gifts – like the scriptures they are given to us for our instruction – and to evoke the gratitude response that is at the foundation of love.

I need to amend my litany; to bring it up to date – even to today. Joshua’s call to the men and women and children of Israel is also a call to me to remember what God has done, is doing and continually will do for those who love Him.

Eileen Burke-Sullivan-Creighton University's Division of Mission and Ministry