



# Breaking Open the Word of Faith

Good News Reflections for the Sundays of September, 2011

by Terry A . Modica



## 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 4, 2011

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Read:

Ezekiel 33:7-9

Ps 95:1-2, 6-9

Romans 13:8-10

Matthew 18:15-20

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### Reflect:

This Sunday's readings all speak of the need to stand up for what is holy and right and true in a way that helps others turn away from sin. If we don't, we are as guilty as the sinner for the sins he or she commits, and we *will* be held accountable (see the first reading).

If we do take a stand against sin but without compassion and mercy and unconditional love, that too is a sin (the second reading).

Jesus shows us in the Gospel reading that it's important to rely on our Christian community for advocacy and prayer support. How?

First, we speak to the sinner. When we know that someone is harming himself and others (all sins are harmful even when we can't see the harm), if we don't try to impart this knowledge to him or her at least once, our silence is unloving and uncaring.

Once we've shared the truth, even if the sinner does not change, we're free of any guilt. But we're not free to stop loving the sinner, and so we take one or two others with us in a stronger effort to help the sinner to understand what's wrong and to repent.

And if that fails, we try again with still more backing.

When every attempt to help someone has failed, only then do we quit and part company. In reality, it's not us who are walking away. The sinner is the one who has chosen the path of separation. However, remember how Jesus treated the Gentiles and tax collectors (i.e., the outsiders, the separated ones): He never stopped loving them. He still chose to die for them.



### Questions for Personal Reflection:

† Whose sins have really disturbed you lately?

† What have you done about it? How loving and caring have you been while handling it?

### Questions for Faith Sharing:

- What bothers you about the way some people have pointed out your sins or the sins of others? How could they have been more compassionate?

† Share the story of a time when someone successfully led another into repentance and growth. Explain why the effort was effective?

### Comments/Prayer Requests:

## 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 11, 2011

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Read:

Sirach 27:30--28:9

Ps 103:1-4, 9-12

Romans 14:7-9

Matthew 18:21-35

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### Reflect:

Jesus' message in this Sunday's Gospel reading explains a line from the prayer he taught: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

The strongest word here is "AS" – the same as, just like, in equal measure.

If there is anyone we have not forgiven, if there is anyone we cannot pray for with love, we'd better keep our mouths shut during this part of the prayer to our Father, who is the Father of all.

Sometimes, we mix "forgetting" with "forgiving." Jesus never said that we must forget what the debtor owes. Forgiveness means remembering – and learning from the memory – without demanding repayment or retribution.

Unforgiveness is a form of punishment: it's payback time. For example, if we remain angry, we hope that our anger or coldness will somehow punish the sinner into repentance. Well, guess what. That never works.

Here's something else we do that never works: holding a grudge to protect ourselves from getting hurt again. Grudges do not free us from the pain of bad memories. It chains us to them.

When we free others from the debts they owe us for hurting us (whether they seek it or not, whether they're still alive or not), we free ourselves and our healing begins – *our* healing!

It's the most loving gift that we can give to ourselves, as it's a gift of love to others. Even when they don't recognize our gift, God does.



### Questions for Personal Reflection:

- † Who angers you because they don't deserve your forgiveness?
- † What are you gaining from unforgiveness and resentment? What will you lose if you forgive?

### Questions for Faith Sharing:

- † What is the most difficult part of forgiveness?
- † What steps do you take for pushing yourself into truly letting go of unforgiveness so you can find healing? Sharing this with others will spread good ideas that could change someone's life!

### Comments/Prayer Requests:

## 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 18, 2011

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Read:

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

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### Reflect:

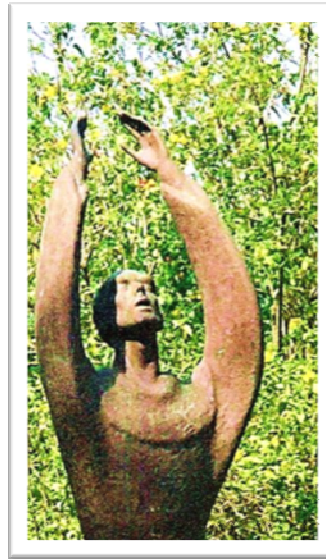
God's not fair! How many times have we felt that way? And it's true, at least by our standards. The parable in the Gospel reading is a fine example of this.

The landowner sure seems very unfair. We can begin to understand him, however, if we think of this parable in terms of parenthood. A loving father cares about each of his children equally. Although he gives more attention to the child who needs it more, he loves the others just as much.

God the Father is like a vineyard owner who gives equally to all. Since we cannot earn our way into heaven, equal benefits are not an injustice to those who labored longer. Rather, God gives complete and perfect love even to those who only discovered a relationship with him at the last minute. He can do no less.

The first reading reminds us that as high as the heavens are above the earth, God's ways are greater than our ways and his thoughts are higher than our thoughts. We think that justice (fairness) means equal treatment, but that harkens back to the Old Testament concept of justice: "an eye for an eye". Jesus raised justice to its highest level, which means being equally loving and kind to all, whether they deserve it or not.

We don't have to *understand* God's higher ways. We only have to be *grateful* that God loves us even when we are unloving. No matter how undeserving of his love we might be, he still gives us the same amount of love that he has for the holiest of saints. He loves us as much as he loves Mary the Blessed



Mother of Christ! "Am I not free to do as I wish with my own love?" he asks.

### Questions for Personal Reflection:

- † When have you felt undeserving of God's goodness?
- † What evidence proves that he never stopped loving you? What did he do for you?

### Questions for Faith Sharing:

- † How has your own opinion of yourself interfered with feeling his love?
- † Share the story of a time when you saw something good happen to a "bad" or undeserving person, or a time when you prayed for something that you didn't get while an unfaithful person received it without turning to God for help. Despite the unfairness of this, why are you glad that you have known God's love? Can you also be glad for the blessings that unbelievers receive from God?

### Comments/Prayer Requests:

## 26<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 25, 2011

Read:

Ezekiel 18:25-28  
Ps 25:4-5, 8-10, 14  
Philippians 2:1-11  
Matthew 21:28-32



### Reflect:

This Sunday's Gospel story was meant to shock people who think they're okay spiritually but do not honestly examine how well they do the Father's will. Jesus said that tax collectors and prostitutes (professions considered to be the most contemptible and unholy) were entering the kingdom of God ahead of religious experts!

The so-called "experts" knew the correct answer to the question that Jesus posed – they knew to say yes to God – but knowing the right answer and actually DOing the right answer is the dividing line between heaven and hell.

God doesn't want correct answers; he wants righteous actions. God doesn't want dutiful compliance to Church teachings; he wants obedience motivated by love and an enthusiastic attitude of serving in the mission of the Church.

What's the value of going to Mass every Sunday, for example, if it doesn't result in deeds of holiness outside the Mass? Do you know people who are away from the Church because they don't understand why it's sinful to divide themselves from the Eucharist and the parish community? If they're doing good works because they genuinely love God, who's to say they won't reach full unity with him sooner than people who attend Mass daily but do little to help others?

The horror in condemning others for apparently saying "no" to God is that it means we're comparing them to ourselves – something we must never never (did I say never?) do. Comparisons make us look better or worse than others. We can only rightfully compare ourselves to the person that we used to be,

i.e., how much closer to (or further from) God we are today compared to yesterday.

### Questions for Personal Reflection:

† Think of the ways that you compare yourself to others. Does it make you feel superior or inferior?

† What exactly are you comparing? Identify that, and then consider how it's evolved in you. Are you doing more in the mission of the Church?

### Questions for Faith Sharing:

† What types of people today are despised the most?

† Who seems least likely to get into heaven? (A terrorist perhaps? An ex-spouse?) How is it possible (to our surprise) that we might be greeted by them when we arrive in heaven? How would you feel about it?

### Comments/Prayer Requests: